MAROZIA

A. G. HALES

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MAROZIA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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A LINDSAY O' THE DALE.

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LONDON: T. FISHER UNWIN.

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By

A. G. HALES

AUTHOR OF "A LINDSAY O' THE DALE,"
"THE WATCHER ON THE TOWER,"
"M'GLUSKY,"
"ANGEL JIM,"
ETC., ETC.

LONDON
T. FISHER UNWIN
ADELPHI TERRACE
1908

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TO MY FRIEND

DR HERBERT GREENWOOD

IN GRATEFUL MEMORY OF HIS SKILL AND CARE

WHILST ATTENDING ONE VERY DEAR TO US

WITH BEST WISHES

FROM THE AUTHOR

1457852

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I

BORIS, THE HUNTER

MAROZIA

I

BORIS, THE HUNTER

MAROZIA the Queen was a very lovely woman, and a very masterful, wilful, wayward woman to boot. Before her lord the King married her, and lifted her to a throne, she had made use of her fateful beauty in a reckless fashion; nor did she trouble overmuch to mend her ways after the crown was upon her glossy head, for in Marozia's veins ran hot blood. Scandal had been busy with her name for years before she became the Consort of the King.

I, who chronicle these things, had often heard her name mentioned with the careless laugh, the shrug of the shoulders, and the half-opened hand hollowed round the mouth, which accompanies a tale told to the detriment of a woman.

Some of these stories were doubtless lies,

fashioned by malice out of material woven from flimsy imagination, for liars are hatched under every bush in these days, the wide world over. I think such men have always lived, ever since the morning stars first sang together—men who know how to strike a woman where she is weakest.

I had heard much of the Royal wanton in my wanderings. Men had told me of her as I sat sipping Turkish coffee with baggy-breeched Mussulmans in the cafés in Philippopolis, where fierce-eyed servants of the Sultan glare with insolent dislike at a Christian, and toy only too readily with a knife hilt on small pretext.

I had listened to her name coupled with sneers and coarse jests, as I drifted down the Bosphorus to the lazy music of the boatman's eternal chant. She was known from Morocco to Berlin, partly on account of her voluptuous beauty, partly because she had a roving eye for a well-knit man, and she never scrupled to please her eye, no matter what the cost or the consequences might be.

A man could not join a shooting or a hunting party in the Near East without hearing of her escapades; she was talked of around the bivouac fires as well as in cities, and when at last she fell dead in her own bed-chamber, pierced by many a dagger stroke, and many

a bullet, there were hundreds of men who lifted their eyebrows, and said: "Eh, but we knew it would come to that in the end. Like the buck that braves the rifle every spring, she had to fall eventually."

She was a woman of trim figure, knowing how to carry herself bravely, and there was that about her which made men who were usually cold and cautious grow hot and reckless. Part of this influence over men she owed to her face and figure; part to her passionate, impetuous nature, part also to her charm of manner, and also in some degree to the daring courage of her disposition.

For Marozia was brave, much braver than most men. Physical fear was an unknown quality to her. She was equally at home in a ballroom or in a saddle, at a wolf hunt, or a skating carnival. She loved power, political intrigues, and adulation, and she hated women, old or young, rich or poor, peasant or peeress. Her eyes were large and full, her eyebrows beautifully arched and pencilled, her features strong, regular, and finely chiselled. Her mouth was made for caresses, her colouring rich and warm. Her hair thick, long, and glossy, and her voice a musical marvel. She was an adventuress armed at all points, one of those women who come into the world at times to carry all before them.

Before she met and enslaved her lord the King it was openly stated that she was the mistress of a military man, whose love turned to venomous hatred; and his hand, later, helped to do her to death—she was the evil genius of many. Few of those with whom she toyed so wantonly left her side unscathed. Mabon the King fell dead across her bleeding body, and his gashed corpse was thrown with hers, through the Palace window, on to the stones below.

I stood upon the spot, and saw the blood-stains on the stones. I saw the rude grave into which both were bundled with less ceremony than is paid to the burying of coolies. And one night I stood there 'midst snow and sleet, whilst half a dozen men swore upon their sword-hilts to avenge her some day. They have not done it yet, perhaps they never will do it; or they may, for the men of their blood are a peculiar breed. They can be icicles, and they can be volcanic; they can play the giant or the dwarf; they can be as simple as children and as subtle as serpents—each part in its turn. They may forget a kindness; I have never known one of them to forget a debt of hate. But it is of the *amours* of Marozia the Queen that I started to write, not of the idiosyncrasies of her people. And now let me tell the tale as

it was told to me one night when I sat in a rude hunting-lodge in the Perrin Mountains, along with the big Swedish hunter, Bjorn Nielson, and some Macedonian sportsmen, and a little Russian officer whose friendship was dear to me.

We had been wolf-hunting all day, climbing over the tall, steep mountains, and diving down into the dark glens; and I had not come out of it with any credit, for I had slipped down a ravine, and had cracked a rib. The big Swede had carried me up the mountain side in his arms like a babe, and had laughed when I told him not to overdo his strength. But we were comfortable in the hunting-lodge, a great fire filled the chimney-place, which stretched right across one end of the building; and the smell of burning pine was wondrous sweet, as it mingled with the perfume of Turkish tobacco.

"Why," I asked, "is this called Marozia's Lodge?" And an old man, who was our guide, servant, and comrade, had made answer, saying: "This is the hunting-lodge where Marozia the Beautiful used to sleep when she came here to hunt the wolf."

"Was she a huntress of big game, then?" I asked. And the man smiled in my face, saying: "Yes, sir, Marozia was a huntress, and a bold one; few men had a bigger heart or

a better nerve. I have seen her stand and shoot into a wolf pack that snarled around her in the open, as coolly as any professional hunter of us all, and she was quick too." He gazed into the fire pensively for a little space. and then I saw a smile gather in his keen, old eyes. "She was worth looking at always, but when her fighting blood was roused then it was worth a long day's march to look at her, with her blazing eyes, her firm-clenched mouth, and her body poised lightly and strongly upon her small feet. No wonder Boris Metchcliffe lost his heart and his head to her."

"Tell me concerning that," I interrupted, "I like to hear of love and lovers' doings. It is greater far than tales of hunting or fighting."

"Do you think so?" answered the old man turning back his grizzled hair from his forehead. "Well, Boris had done much fighting and more hunting in his time before he made love to Marozia the Beautiful; but none of it ever brought him as much harm as his wooing. I warned him, but he had laughed in my face, telling me that my old blood had run thin, like wine that the vinters spoil with snow water.

"Boris was a big man, with a strong, magnetic face, one of those men whom one loves to see by his side when spears are dipping to the charge. He was a mountain

man, as his father and his father's father had been before him for generations. A peasant, a hunter, and a fighter. He had fought the Turks in many an engagement, and hated them with all his heart and soul, as a good Christian should hate all infidels. When he was at home Boris used to till his little patch of soil on the slope of the mountain, where his cabin perched, and sing as he guided the plough.

"He said it cheered the oxen to hear a ploughman sing blithely, and they needed cheering, for the mountain side was steep, and the soil was full of rocks, and the cattle were small. Many a blithe peasant lass would encourage Boris with her eyes when he went to the little church on Sundays, or when they met him at the village feasts and dances, but he kept himself heart-whole and happy until he met Marozia the Queen when she came here on one of her winter expeditions. Boris was one of the tried hunters, and it so happened that fate made him one of the personal attendants of Marozia the witch. I was the other. When Marozia came to the mountains, she was jaded and weary with the life of cities, but soon the snow and the wind, the perfume of the forest pines, and the climbing and shooting brought her back to health. The wind whipped her cheeks

until they glowed with colour, not the pretty pink that you see in some faces, but the deep, rich red of the rose that grows in our valleys.

"At first all was well with Boris. He looked at Marozia as a goddess who was far up out of his reach, and if she had let him alone his madness would have burned itself out in time, as our forest fires burn themselves out when the wind is still. But it was not Marozia's way to let a man alone if he pleased her eye. The freshness of the mountaineer, his springy step as he strode over the hills, his hearty, happy laugh, his blithe song, his rude, untutored manliness, his bold independent spirit, and his immense strength of limb, all called to her, and appealed to her, and woke the tigress in her nature. She would sport with this man, play with him until she tired, and then—well—the wind has sung that song too often for me to need to tell it again.

"In the daytime she would make Boris attend her, treating him as an equal, not as a hunter. I have seen her lift his wine flask to her lips and drink, and then pass it to him, and I have seen her smile because his hand shook like a leaf as he lifted it to his mouth. Often when we came to a rift in the mountain side she would call to Boris and beg him to lift her over, and he would take her up in his big arms and spring across

like a buck, making nothing of her weight; but if he did not happen to be near, and I offered my services, she would let the heavy lids drop down over her large eyes and look at me with a laugh playing about her mouth —such an insolent look, full of a warning to me to know my place and keep it, for Marozia knew well that I was trying to keep the son of my old friend from making a fool of himself.

"Then, light of foot as any doe, she would spring over the rift, letting me see that it was the man, not the man's help, that she needed, and meant to have. Once I spoke plainly to Boris, for the sake of the lifelong friendship I had borne his father, and words had passed between him and me that had sent my hand to the hilt of my hunting-knife; but I remembered in time that it was his father who stood over me, yataghan in hand, in the narrow pass, and saved me from the butcher's knife in the rout that followed the Battle of Plevhina.

"Marozia drew the young man to her as the moon draws the sea. At night she would make him sit with her by her bivouac fire, and tell her tales of our peasant life, or sing her songs, and she would sing to him, just as if he were some haughty noble instead of a simple hunter. She played the peasant

damsel's part in those wonderful hours, braiding her glossy hair by the twilight, and bewitching him with her smiles, and he went mad I think, mad with love, just as some men go mad with wine. She and he would go away at times with no attendant, and be lost for a whole day amidst the eternal forests, and at night when the moon was rising high in the skies, and the stars were shining down upon the world, they would come back to the bivouac hand in hand. The scandal blazed far and near until the wooing of Boris the Hunter, and Marozia the Queen, was talked of in every peasant's hut in the sweep of the Perrin Mountains.

"And we wondered what Mabon the King would say when it reached his ears in his far-off capital.

"The end came as quickly as the beginning. Her love melted away as snow melts when the frost breaks and the hot sun shines out suddenly. For that was Marozia's way with men. She left him one night with burning kisses, she met him in the morning with a little, cold, mocking laugh, and put him in his servant's place again. She wanted new wine; the old clogged her palate. He stood like a man who is struck from behind with the steel—stood and looked at her. And she lolled back in her furs, and draping her

wonderful eyes with heavy lids and long lashes, eyed him with queenly insolence, insulting him silently with her eyes.

"Slowly the colour came back to his cheeks until they burnt a dusky red, and I for a moment fancied he would spring upon her and crush her, for I knew, and he knew, what this would mean to him. He would be the butt of every wine-shop jester for the rest of his life, and the peasant girls would flout him as a fool who had filled his mouth with honey beyond his eating. His name would be a peg for fools to hang a taunt and a laugh upon, and the girls would make songs about him and his foolishness, to sing as they worked in the tobacco plantations or amidst the vines, or when they plucked the petals for the making of attar of roses.

"Marozia was very near her death that hour, but she did not flinch. She met his angry glances with unaverted head and mocking eyes. He hung upon her eyes for nearly a minute, then he threw up his head and laughed—the low, mocking laugh of a man who throws a wanton from him when he has tired of her caresses, and looked her up and down, slowly, contemptuously, from her hair to her pretty feet. Then, without a word he walked with long, swift strides to the edge of a great cliff that goes down like a wall into

the valley, where the peasants look like ants from the heights, and with a leap he was gone to his death.

"The girls did not make a song about Boris to sing in the fields, but they made one about Marozia—a song that would burn a woman's ears if she heard it."

II

THE HORSESHOE LETTER

II

THE HORSESHOE LETTER

In Pegora village there was much merry-making and lightness of heart, for the day had been a feast day, a time of joviality, much thin red, or white wine, native to the country, had been drunk in the cafés; but little harm had resulted from the tippling, because it takes many bottles of that ungenerous liquid to warm a man's blood to the quarrelsome point.

Now, the night had come down, warm and rather pleasant for folks who wanted to be abroad. Tall, thin, gaunt men and women of the humbler peasant classes loitered about, taking life easily for the time. They had a hard life as a rule, with plenty of work, poor pay, and very little food, and that of the coarsest kind; and who could blame them if they made the most of a holiday when it came their way? Their holidays were not

expensive affairs. They usually came from their rude cabins leading a donkey laden with fruit or vegetables, a donkey for the most part as thin and as gaunt as themselves.

The wife usually tramped behind the donkey, and often carried a small pannier full of eggs upon her back, whilst the lads and lasses carried anything else the family might have to sell.

As for food, why, that was taken with them always as a matter of course. It was madness to spend the little money they had to toil so hard to obtain on mere eatables. A loaf or two of home-made black bread, a cake of cheese made from goats' milk, an onion or two for soup, and a skin of wine with a little dried fruit filled all their needs unless, perhaps, they had a wedding to attend. Then a pair of fowls and a little dried goats' flesh was added to the store; but this did not happen often.

The roads had been dry and dusty, and this had made the tramp into the village anything but an unmixed blessing. Then had followed the marketing, with its almost endless chaffering, for there are few persons even in the East who can bargain more closely than a Pegorian housewife. The spending of a shilling in the market-place will call forth a volcano of angry words, sighs, abuses, groans, threats,

and sundry remarks regarding the parentage of buyers and sellers, that are far more pungent than polite.

But as soon as business is concluded, then come the dance and song, the wine-cup and the story. Then the old men sit about and talk of the past, the young ones get the lasses away to talk of the future, whilst the matrons talk, as matrons will the world over, of the joys and sorrows of mothering.

The folks would commence to stream homewards an hour or two before the dawn, so that they might be in time for the next day's work, but to-night, it is pleasure first and sorrow later.

There is plenty of music of a kind, the shrill music that the reed pipes make, and there is much singing as the young persons go about hand-in-hand. Here and there groups of a dozen couples dance the kissing dance, which brings forth much laughter and stamping of feet, the young matrons standing by calling out chaffingly to the maids, bidding them not to be too coy.

It is against the laws of etiquette for a matron to take part in this dance, because the kissing that comes with the swing round is apt to make young husbands jealous, and a quarrel, followed quickly by a knife stab, is liable to spoil the pleasures of a whole village,

where so many meet who are related by blood or by marriage.

The night is well upon its way, and there has been no quarrelling. Suddenly down the street comes a party of three horsemen, all armed. They had ridden far and fast, so it would seem, if one might judge by the condition of their horses, which, though jaded, show by their points to an experienced eye that they are well bred.

The dancers in the street draw back, and allow the wayfarers to pass on, and many curious eyes follow them until they draw bridle in front of Bresco's wine-shop.

Now, Bresco is the most important man in the village. He is the chief vintner, and, besides, he owns three farms and a fine vineyard, and sends away much wine in little wooden kegs to foreign parts every year. He is a warm man, every one knows that, and his one daughter is much sought after by the military officers who love to swagger about, curling their moustaches and clinking their spurs, ready to thrust a quarrel upon any one who might happen to cross them.

It is Bresco himself who comes running out to meet these belated guests, and as he leads the horses into the inner courtyard around which his hostel is built like so many boxes around a hollow square, he eyes the newcomers

sharply, for father Bresco had a sharp nose for a secret, and for an intrigue, and he has been sorely puzzled to make up his mind these two days past concerning a woman who has been staying at his hostel as a guest, a woman who dresses and talks and eats like a peasant of the better class, and yet has a way at times of looking at him as if he, Bresco, the most important man for leagues around, was only a clod of inanimate dirt.

He had caught that look more than once, and it had wounded his vanity; even whilst it set those sharp wits of his guessing whether or not her peasant's dress might be a disguise. He had hinted as much to his daughter, but that damsel had bidden him rather sharply to keep his eyes from the beautiful face and handsome figure of the guest.

"What is it to thee," the girl had asked, "who she is, or what she is, so long as she pays, and pays well?" And Bresco, who stood in awe of this daughter's biting tongue, had gone about his business grumbling not a little. Now, here were other mysterious strangers, coming from heaven knows where, on the Lord only knew what errand, coming on a feast night, too; and Bresco swore by his own particular saint that he believed there was something in it, and where there were secrets there was usually money, if a man only had

the wit to know how to lay hands upon it. And Bresco loved money even more than he loved prying into other people's business, so he watched as an old fox will watch a rabbit warren. He soon saw that there was a secret understanding between the man who appeared to be the leader of the new arrivals and the woman who was the guest of the hostel.

The newcomers did not seem to want to join in the merrymaking of the villagers, though the woman had not been backward in that matter during the day. She had even entered into the kissing dance, and had struck up a flirtation with Petro, the blacksmith, who was not only the best smith outside of Belgrade, but as handsome a man as a woman might wish to pass a pleasant hour with, though over-hasty in his temper, and given to quarrelling for small causes.

Petro, the smith, was in the café when the daughter of the house came to him and asked him if he would examine the horses the travellers had been riding.

"It is a saint's day," answered Petro sulkily, for he had cherished the hope that he might find an opportunity to exchange a few more words with the handsome stranger, for where a woman was concerned he was as weak as water.

"It is a saint's day," muttered he; "let the

horses wait until to-morrow; they will be all the better for a night's rest."

"Oh, a saint's day," mimicked the vintner's daughter. "Very well, I must find some gipsy tinker to do the work for the lady."

"The lady! What lady?"

"Why, stupid, the one who is staying here. She wants to purchase one of those horses if they are sound, and she sent me to you to examine them for her. She said: 'Go and ask that shoeing smith with the handsome face if he will look at the horses for me before I make a purchase,' but as your conscience is so tender I must get other help I suppose. You must not fall out with the saint, Petro."

"May the devil run away with you and the saints too! Why did you not give me the woman's message?"

"But the saint, Petro; think of the dear saint," scoffed the lass.

"A live woman is better than a dead saint any day," grinned Petro.

"Tell her I will look at the horses at once. Has she any particular fancy do you know?"

"Yes; she said she like the grey, and its price also suited her. If the animal is sound she will buy it."

"Ah, there she is at the door now. We will go to her at once," said Petro.

"Think of the saints, Petro," gibed the girl.

"Think of the devil," growled the smith. "You have an asp under your tongue, girl."

"So has every woman, but it is not every day she finds a fool to sting," was the mocking rejoinder.

The smith examined the horses, and the woman bought the grey, and then she asked Petro to remove the shoes so that she might have the animal re-shod on the morrow. He began to grumble, but when she offered to hold the lantern for him he consented, and went off to get his tools. He took longer over that job than he had ever been known to take since he was an unskilled boy, and when the handsome guest came into the hostel she was almost bursting with merriment, and her eyes were dancing with mischief, and something that she whispered into the ear of the vintner's daughter caused that buxom lass to explode with mirth.

Having done this, the unknown made her way to her own apartment. She carried a horseshoe in her hand, which she had told Petro she would hang in her bed-chamber for luck. But as soon as she had barred her door she drew a small screw-driver from her pocket, and, placing the horseshoe upon the table, examined it carefully. A little groove ran round the shoe, and here and there in the

groove she saw the heads of screws. These she deftly withdrew, proving that this was no new trick of hers.

As the last screw came out the horseshoe fell apart; it was made of two pieces, beautifully fitted together, and between the iron layers lay a letter deftly coiled. She opened it with trembling, eager fingers—her big, luminous eyes shining with excitement as she did so, and her full bosom rising and falling under her peasant's bodice.

As soon as her eyes fell upon the contents her whole face changed. Her cheeks grew ashen white, her nostrils closed and expanded with the force of her breathing. She rent the letter to many fragments, and threw it upon the floor, and ground the pieces with her heels.

"The coward!" she gasped; "the miserable, pitiful coward! He fears to come and meet me, because some of the Court spies have been coupling my name with his in the ears of the King."

She picked up the pieces of paper from the floor and weighed them in the hollow of her hand—weighed them coldly and critically.

"They are light," she mused, "very light, as light as the love of a craven. He did not think of me—did not think of my danger, did not care what risks I ran—I who risked everything for love."

Then she laughed, and, drawing a miniature from her bosom, held it over the flame of the lamp until it was scorched into shapelessness. It was a portrait of one of the King's Guard.

Once again she weighed the torn paper in her hand. The colour had come back to her cheeks, she was dusky red with wrath. "The coward! The coward! to fear to keep the appointment he himself had sued for on his knees; and let me run the risk; let me put my neck in a noose, let me give my enemies at Court a chance to tell yet another tale to the King. Well, he tried to make me play the wanton; he shall see how Marozia plays the Queen."

She stood with knitted brow for a while, musing. "The fool! Does he think I will let him live to boast to his boon companions over his wine that he fooled Marozia the Queen, that he made me await his pleasure in a hamlet like any courtesan? Does he think he has me in his power to play with?"

Slowly she burnt each tiny scrap of paper; then opening her windows she let the ashes blow away.

Standing in the courtyard below was Petro, the smith. She saw him, and laughed.

"I am not the only fool in the village to-night," said she, and closed the window.

Half an hour later she stood in the same room dressed like a Queen; her peasant's costume lay in a huddled heap upon the floor.

"Now," said she to the vintner's daughter, "send the men to me who came here on horseback an hour ago, and bid them make all speed."

The girl went hot-foot on her errand, and with all speed the men came at the bidding of the Queen. Wonderfully lovely she looked standing there in that dingy, little room. The men bent the knee in silence.

In curt, cold tones she told them that a deadly insult had been put upon her, and she named the officer of the King's Guard.

With one accord their hands went to their sword-belts, and the blades flashed out.

"I can trust you," she said, and as she said the words she smiled upon the men, and they answered her in low, hoarse tones.

"He shall die before the sun sets three times," answered the leader. "We will take fresh horses and go on that business now."

"It is well," answered Marozia, "and wherever you ride tell it boldly and openly that Marozia the Queen is in the village of Pegora amongst her own peasants, sharing their joys at the feast as she is willing to share in their sorrows. Tell that also in the

ears of the King, but not until you have done your business with the Captain of the Guard."

The men saluted in silence; in silence they rode away, and in silence they did her errand to the bitter end. When they had gone, Marozia the Queen went forth in the moonlight, along the narrow street; and in the market-place the peasants crowded round to kiss the hem of her garment, and do her homage, loving her because she had come amongst them to share their innocent joys, and for her sake they blessed the name of her lord, the King—but none of them saw the hollow in the horseshoe, not even Petro, the smith.

III

SETHIN, THE HUNCHBACK

III

SETHIN, THE HUNCHBACK

"Jesu, what a man to be near the Queen! Did'st ever see such a figure in all your mortal life, Secckin?"

"Not I, Velo. Art quite sure 'tis a man? It looks more like an ape to my way of thinking."

"Better speak below thy breath, neighbour," whispered Bernados, the tailor, who was a discreet man, and timorous; "better speak below thy breath, for if half what I hear my patrons say concerning this misshapen personage be true, his hand will fly to his hilt for a small matter."

Velo, the contrabandist, drew his tall figure to its full height, and lifted his bold head higher.

"A fig for him and his hilt," he cried, "there are others in the world who care as little as he for a little blood spilling. You are overtame, friend Bernados. As for me, I

lower my breath in the market-place for no man, either King or King's lackey."

"Well, here comes one who can tell us all we want to know; one who is as fearless as thyself, good Velo," was the tailor's mild reply.

Velo turned his eyes in the direction the tailor had indicated with a jerk of his thumb, and his keen eyes twinkled merrily.

"Aye," he said, "this is a man if you like. Now, if I were Marozia the Queen this is the sort of man I would save my sighs and smiles for." And he stepped forward with outstretched hand to greet the newcomer, crying, "How is it with you, Golganoff?"

The new arrival was a man of about the middle height, a man nearly five-and-forty, in the flood-tide of his manhood—when a sound man is at his best, and looks his best. His fair, curly hair was touched here and there with a streak of silver; his yellow moustache, that drooped like two horns, swept around his mouth, and reached far below the line of his resolute chin; also showed a white hair here and there. His head was rather small, but it was poised upon a magnificent neck that rose from between the broad shoulders like a column of bronze. He was deep in the chest, narrow in the flank, clean limbed; an athlete trained to arms. One of the few survivors of

a class of men who hired themselves out to go anywhere, and do anything that a fighting man might do without dishonour.

Only a few months back, I, who chronicle these things, sat in a little cabaret and shared a stoup of wine with him. He had never performed a menial task in his life, neither had his father, or his father's father for many generations. Fighting was his trade; guarding some diplomat going upon some dangerous mission, escorting a merchant over the brigand-infected mountains; guarding a man's home while the head of the house went a-journeying; acting as guard-of-honour to maid or matron, to ensure his charge proper respect and due courtesy in the streets, or upon the roads; carrying a message one day for a king, the next doing the same for some bandit true, always to the death, to the man who was for the time being his employer; slow to loosen his blade in its scabbard, slower still to put it back when once unsheathed; sure of himself, and therefore sure of the respect that was due to him; never arrogant to the humblest, never fawning to the greatest—a man from the crown of his curly head to the heels of his feet.

He was dressed as the men of his order always dress. A small, crimson skull-cap sat jauntily on his curly head. His richly-

embroidered blue jacket was of the finest cloth. His shirt, open at the neck to allow the wind and sun to play upon his full, round throat, was of snowy whiteness. His kilt, reaching to his knees, was of deep crimson. His knees were bare, but the calves of his legs were covered with short, white stockings, crossed and recrossed by leather bands. His feet were encased in shoes of black Russian leather turned up at the points. Around his middle he wore a belt of black leather, in which was stuck a pair of silver-mounted Turkish pistols, and a long ivory-hilted dagger, that had been old when the Crusaders were gathering in Europe. A long, straight blade hung on his thigh, and all men knew that money would not purchase any of those weapons. They were heirlooms, handed down from father to son, and each in his turn made a point of keeping them unstained by anything that smacked of dishonourable doings.

His sword was this man's charter all over the Near East. When he had to take an oath he did not swear by the saints, he did not put his hand upon the cross or upon a Bible, he simply laid his hand upon his blade and said: "I swear;" and from Constantinople to Belgrade no man, either Turk, Jew, or Christian, asked for more.

Such was Golganoff, the man who clasped

hands with Velo, the contrabandist, in the busy market-place of Sofia.

"Tell me, comrade, who is that misshapen oaf that looks like an ape, and is always dangling near the Royal woman?"

"Steady, friend Velo; that tongue of thine will let the life out of thy ribs one of these fine days," laughed Golganoff. "What man?" he continued, "is there not enough trouble the year round to give thee thy fill of fighting, that you must run hare-footed to seek it?"

"May the devil sit down to sup with me this night, comrade, if I do not think this bow-backed stranger has bewitched all the men in Sofia. Whenever or wherever I speak of him, I am warned to be careful. At one moment it is the landlord of my cabaret, who puts his finger to his lip and cries: 'Sh-ss, sh-ss, good Velo; not so loud, I pray thee, for thy safety's sake;' or it is the pretty wench who fills my wine cup from the leather bottle, who turns pale and whispers: 'Have a care, good Velo; have a care;' or this tailor here, who trembles so when I speak of the hunchback that his clothes fit him only where they happen to touch his carcass; and now, to crown it all, you Golganoff, you of all men, take up the tale. Who the devil is the man? Is he

another lover of Marozia's? If so, she must think a crooked stick is good enough to beat her husband with. I could understand her madness with that Hungarian lover of hers for he was fit to fill a woman's eye whether he went afoot or on horseback."

"Well, Velo, here he comes; but if I had to quarrel with either, I would rather it were this man than the bow-backed one."

A man, riding an immense black horse, came pacing slowly through the market, he was of great stature, dressed in the half-barbaric splendour of the Hungarian nobility. He made an imposing figure.

"Marozia the Beautiful has two sorts to choose from," grinned Velo. "I have heard it said that when a woman gets tired of the beautiful she will dote on the hideous, and it is a far cry from this splendid Hungarian to Sethin Bow-back."

A lot of other folks were talking much as Velo had been doing, for no one could understand why Marozia the Queen allowed a deformed man to play the lover. She who always seemed so fastidious in matters of personal appearance in all her *amours*.

"Ha, ha, ha!" tittered an old hag to a crowd of girls, "a sour apple suits a jaded palate better than a sweet one sometimes, and Marozia would ransack the world for a whim."

"Yes, yes, any man is better than no man," sniggered fat Annette, the fish-hawker, and she leaned upon her empty basket.

"Is that why you married such a lout as thy man, then?" demanded the hag. And all the girls laughed.

Just then Marozia drove through the market-place, leaning back in her open carriage. She surveyed the scene with the insolence born of power; possibly she guessed what the peasants were saying concerning her, and so gave them scorn for scorn. Her eyes were half-closed, and a sleepy smile played round her red mouth.

"She is like a cat sitting in the sun," said the hag to the fishwife.

Sethin Bow-back of Montenegro came down the street a minute later, and seeing Golganoff with Velo, the contrabandist, beckoned the former to follow him.

"Will you take service with that crooked stick?" demanded Velo.

"If he pays, why not?" was the curt reply.

In a wine-shop Sethin of Montenegro drew Golganoff on one side. "Are you a free man at present?" he asked.

"For a month I am free, then I journey to Philippopolis to fill a promise."

"Then for a month will you be my man?"

"If it is in the way of my trade, yes."

"It is."

"Then I am your man; no need to tell you my price, you know it."

"I will gladly pay the price. Now swear."

Golganoff lifted his sword and touched it with his lips. "I swear to be your man," he said simply, and rose up and slightly bent his head as to a master.

The hunchback motioned him to a seat. "You know Marozia the Queen?"

"Who does not?" was the laconic answer.

"Good, watch over her night and day. Go to her now; she expects you."

"Do I serve Marozia, or do I serve you?"

"If you serve me you serve her."

Golganoff smiled, the smile of a large experience in human affairs. "Perhaps now," he answered; "but when a woman is in the question it may be otherwise a week hence, and I would know whom I serve."

"You are my man."

"Very good."

Golganoff rose up and went about his trade. He became as a shadow to Marozia the Beautiful; when she walked he was not three paces behind her; when she rode, he rode half a horse's length in the rear, and Marozia made much of him though she had plenty of other matters on her hands.

One day the brilliant, haughty, stalwart, Hungarian lived in her smiles, the next it was Sethin Bow-back, the Montenegrian.

"She plays with fire and knows it," laughed Golganoff to himself; "one man is a foil to the other, and for my own part I think she has other fish in the pan, or else she is thinking more of politics than of love."

Marozia's residence was an old-world place in the hills, just out of the city; a dwelling with a balcony running all along its front. Roses climbed up that balcony, and blushed in the sunlight. Scandalmongers said that more than roses climbed up by moonlight, and had better cause to blush.

It seemed as if both the lovers thought so, for the Hungarian gave Velo, the contrabandist, who had entered his service, orders to watch that balcony, and Sethin of Montenegro gave the same order to Golganoff. Each lover suspected the other, and each was bent on revenge.

On the third night of watching each man reported to his master that the Queen was faithless in her love, for a man had scaled the balcony leading to the Queen's apartments, and had been met and welcomed by Marozia the Fickle. Velo and Golganoff had both witnessed the episode from different points of vantage, and neither knew that

the other was playing watch-dog on the balcony.

With fierce wrath in his heart the Hungarian snatched up his sword and, bidding Velo follow him, rode in mad haste to the Queen's residence. Little he cared how he might set the fires of scandal blazing; a man tricked in his love thinks the whole world faithless until he cools. The hunchback was as furious as his rival when he received his henchman's warning.

"This must end to-night, Golganoff," he said. "She blows hot and blows cold, but if she is not for me, that big beast from Hungary shall not have her."

Tucking his sword under his arm, with his man at his heels, he made his way with all speed to the balcony that led to the bed-chamber of Marozia the Beautiful. And then the rivals met, one coming from the northern end of the gardens, one from the southern.

No words passed between them, each man flung away his cloak and scabbard, and in a moment the night air thrilled to the strokes of steel on steel. The two men-servants acting as seconds, stood by with bared blades in their hands ready to fly at each other's throats in spite of their former friendship, and neither would have thought any the

worse of the other for it, if it had come to a death struggle between them, though as soon as their terms of servitude was ended they would be good friends again. Such things came in the way of their day's work.

Marozia heard the sound of trampling feet, and the hiss and click of blade meeting blade, and came to the balcony in a long, loose robe, her glorious wealth of hair falling in a waving mass down her back, and with her came a man, young, and well made.

He would have leant over the balcony to watch the fight, but she put one white-robed arm around him and drew him back into the shadow. "Not yet," she whispered; "let them go on to the end. I have four men posted in readiness. They will come when I call."

Down below the fight waxed fiercer and fiercer. The hunchback had not the strength nor the length of arm of his adversary, but he had the cunning of the devil, as Velo said in the café afterwards. Every feint, every trick of swordcraft he knew, and in the end the Hungarian fell over on his side, run through the heart. Then Marozia clapped her white hands, and four men rushed out upon the hunchback.

Velo was kneeling by his employer's body, and took no part in what followed, but Gol-

ganoff rushed into the *melée*, backing the hunchback with all his skill and power. But four fresh men to one nearly spent, and one sound man, is no match in sword play, and the end came quickly. Then down from the balcony came Marozia the Beautiful, and with her Mabon the King.

When the hunchback saw who it was with the woman, his quick wit told him that both he and the Hungarian had been fooled by a woman's wiles, and, lifting himself upon his elbow with the last atom of strength, he threw a curse at her, calling her by a name that the worst woman loathes to hear. But Marozia only smiled. Velo attended to Golganoff's wounds, and carried him away to nurse him back to life and health, but the two masters were past nursing. On the balcony in the moonlight Marozia the Queen whispered to Mabon, her lord.

"Tut, tut, my King. Why fall out with my methods since two who would have torn the crown from your head and mine are past all scheming?" And he, the weakest of all her victims, let his head slide on to her bosom whilst she toyed with his hair, and cooed of loving and trusting.

IV

IN THE VALE OF ROSES

IV

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"What fat legs Martha has!"

"Yes; she would be almost as useful as a mule in the wine-press."

"Ah, but look at Annetta; she has legs like broom handles and feet like flat irons. She may not be worth running after in the dance, neighbour, but in the wine-press, oh! that is another matter. She will squeeze the last drop out of a grape."

"Just turn your eyes on Presca; she is a well-made girl, if you like."

"Well-made! Presca well-made! Ho, ho! that is a good joke. Why, she is as heavy and as clumsy as an ox!"

"Well, and if she is heavy, what of that? She can tread the wine out of the grapes all the better, can't she?"

"Oh, no one said she could not crush a grape with her big feet. I danced with her at the last feast, and she trod on my feet until

I wished her at the devil. She could tread a green melon flat. There is no shape about your Presca, she is beef to the ankles."

The speakers were a group of peasant youths who were watching a party of girls treading out the wine in the old-fashioned way from the grapes that the men and lads tossed in the vat from time to time. The girls could hear a good deal of the criticism, most of which was merely intended as rough banter, and when it came their time to talk, they did not spare their tormentors; and then the old folks fell to chaffing the young men, who looked sheepish under the whip of the girls' pointed cynicism.

"Take your pigs to a better market next time, my sons," shrilled an old woman; "for a lad's tongue cuts only the skin, but a maid's tongue cuts to the bone."

"They'll find that out when they marry, mother," cried a man who was passing with a huge basket of grapes on his shoulder.

"Ah, is that you, Keppo? So you have come back, have you? What news have you picked up, eh?" Keppo had been afar, taking tobacco to the merchants, which his master had grown on his plantation. A crowd gathered round to hear the traveller's tales.

"Didst hear anything concerning the coming of Marozia?" queried the hag. "It is in all

men's mouths that she is to come to the Valley of Roses, but for my part I will believe it when I see her."

"Men talk the truth, then, for once," responded Keppo. "Marozia the Beautiful will be here by the time the roses are ready for picking, and a gay company will come with her. Many of her Court ladies are coming to purchase their own attar of roses, because they have a fancy to smell the perfume first of all in the flower."

"When is Marozia the Queen to come here, Keppo? In how many days, think you?"

"That is a question no man can answer," replied Keppo. "Marozia never does as other great ladies do. She may come riding here any day now, for the roses are nearly ready, as all the world knows. How heavy the air is with the perfume," he continued, drawing in a deep breath through his nostrils; "surely there can be no other place like our valley for sweet smells."

"Pah!" cried another man, spitting on the ground, "a fig for the perfume of the valley. Give me the cold breezes that blow from the tops of the mountains yonder, and the strong smell of the resinous pines. That is the perfume for a man. You men of the vales grow more and more like women every year. No wonder the Turks come and harry the

houses in the valleys with fire and sword at their pleasure."

An angry murmur broke out from the ring of valley folk at this, but Keppo, who loved peace, simply stilled it by saying: "Have you heard that Marozia's new lover is a Turk?"

This announcement caused a great commotion.

"A Turk!" cried one. "The woman would make love to the evil one himself if it suited her whim."

"She is bewitched surely," spoke up another.

"Anything in the shape of a man will suit Marozia," jeered the hag.

"Perhaps she is up to some more of her political tricks," ventured Keppo. "No one but Marozia knows where her loving ends and her scheming begins."

"Who may the Turk be?" demanded a man who had not hitherto spoken.

"They call him Ismay Pascha," was Keppo's answer.

"It must be a lie," shouted a thick-set, powerfully-built man who had joined the group of workmen quietly, and had remained unnoticed. This was Sarakunoff, the famous insurgent, one of the fiercest and most desperate men in the East. He had been a "Wolf's Head," an outlaw, for years. Yet

he came and went much as he pleased, for every one knew that, besides his other arms, he never moved without a bomb in his jacket pocket—a bomb that would kill anything and everything within a radius of thirty yards from where it exploded.

"You think it a lie, Sarakunoff? Tell me why Marozia has done many things that no man would credit until she had done them?"

Sarakunoff stood with heavy brows knitted in savage thought. When he spoke he said: "This man, Ismay Pascha, is the dog who led the troop last summer when they swept the village of Reno of every living thing, man, woman, and child. He may think he is safe in Bulgaria, but he will have to pay for that Macedonian blood yet, and Marozia is a Christian woman. She would never let an infidel dog be her lover."

"I have told the tale as I heard it," said Keppo sulkily, "and with my own eyes I have seen her with the man. If they are not lovers, they both know how to act a part well enough to deceive all men. She smiles on him, and he eats her with his eyes."

Sarakunoff spat on the ground and, turning, walked away as silently as he had come.

"If Marozia and her Turkish lover comes to the valley for the gathering of roses," whispered

a man, "Sarakunoff will not be far away. He has a vendetta against that Turk, and, as we all know, he fears nothing."

"Marozia cannot love the Turk over-much," put in another, "or surely she would not bring him here where Macedonians come."

"For my part," growled another, "I love the infidels as little as any one, but, for all that, if Sarakunoff must kill this one I wish he would do it somewhere else. We are too close to the borders of Turkish territory for the killing to go unavenged. Why, we can see the Turkish fort on the hills from here on a fine day. I pray the saints Marozia may not bring us more trouble. We have had our share, neighbours."

At these ominous words the women who were suckling their babies clasped the infants closer in their arms and looked fearfully round, for the shadow of the Bashi Bazouks was always on their hearts.

The next day Keppo's tale was verified, for Marozia the Queen, with half a dozen of her ladies, rode gaily into the Valley of Roses, and on her bridle hand rode Ismay Pascha. His eyes were heavily lidded, his features massive, a remorseless mouth, shaded by a thick, brown moustache, was the dominant feature of his face. His big hooked nose made him look like a bird of prey, and his deeds did not

belie his looks. He rode a fine horse, and handled it superbly.

In and out, from one rose garden to another, down the length of the valley rode the gay cavalcade, and the Turk plainly saw that the Bulgar peasants hated him, for they were very near akin to the Macedonians. He let them see just as plainly that he despised them.

"They don't love you over-much," Marozia whispered to the man, while they halted their horses in the shade of a clump of trees at noon.

"No," he said grimly; "but they fear me."

"You would rather have fear than love," she murmured, letting those marvellous eyes of hers search his face.

He caught her eyes with his own and held them for a long, long time. Then he leant close and whispered: "I must have love or hate; anything in between is too tame for a man of my nature."

"You do not believe in mere friendship?" she queried, playing with one of her gauntlets as she spoke.

"Between very old or very young people, yes," he made answer.

"But not between——" she commenced, and bit her words off sharply.

"Not between you and I, my Queen," he whispered hoarsely, finishing the sentence for

her. It must be love or hate, either you love me, or you have led me on to laugh at me."

"In which case——" she began.

"In which case," he said, taking the words from her mouth, "I shall hate you with my whole heart."

"You do not mince your phrases," she cried.

"Why should I?" was his retort. "I am a soldier."

"If you fight as you woo there is no fear of your enemies misunderstanding you," cried she.

"Nor the woman I woo and want, either," was his reply. "You understand me, my Queen?"

"Do you understand me?" she demanded.

He drew the slack of his bridle-rein slowly through his big, strong fingers, and smiled. "Is there a man born who understands all the moods of a beautiful and bewitching woman?" he asked.

She flicked him lightly across the hands with her riding-whip, and, meeting his gaze, gave him a long, slow, dreamy smile that brought the impulsive colour in a flood to his sun-tanned cheeks. So they sat and fenced with each other, caring nothing that a hundred pairs of curious eyes were upon them, and the peasant girls plucking blooms amidst the rose

bushes whispered to one another and laughed, whilst the old hags sniggered and made mock of the name of Mabon the King. But the men looked round them continually, and spoke with bated breath of Sarakunoff, the insurgent leader, and his vendetta. So the days came and went, and the smouldering scandal spread until it blazed, and folks asked one another where it would end. But Sarakunoff made no sign.

The roses were all plucked, and the distilleries were busy. Marozia and her ladies went fishing for trout in the river that came brawling down from the mountains. Hot as was the day, the water was cold, for it was fed by the snow that was still melting in the ravines of the Perrin Mountains. The ladies romped like school girls out of bounds. Carrying nets attached to long handles, they scooped up the spotted beauties as they darted from their hiding-places under the eaves of the small rocks that lay strewn about the shallow stream.

To them came Ismay Pascha, and the Court ladies discreetly drew away, leaving Marozia the Queen alone with her tempestuous lover. By-and-by he took the net from her hands and tossed it down on the bank, and together they sauntered amongst the olive trees, far from the sight of the peasants' prying eyes.

Then Ismay Pascha came to a halt, and his thick lips shook.

"Marozia," he said, "this butterfly sport must end."

He would have taken her in his arms, but she, lithe and quick as a leopard, evaded him. He stood with a black frown upon his face, gnawing his lips, clenching and unclenching his hands spasmodically. He looked a dangerous animal at that moment, dangerous even for a queen to toy with.

But Marozia did not know what fear was. Her head was thrown back, her hair coming uncoiled fell down to her waist. Her eyes were dancing with excitement, her breath coming in quick, uneven gasps.

"You have used me for your sport," the Pascha said thickly; "but even a queen may go too far."

He strode towards Marozia, and as he did so, Sarakunoff, the insurgent, hurled himself out of a clump of trees on top of him and brought him down. The Turk was a plaything in the outlaw's hands, and, recognising the futility of struggling he lay still.

Turning his eyes on Marozia he said with a sneer, "So this is your love, is it?"

"No; this is my hate," she made answer. She knelt and whispered a man's name in his ear. "You remember him?" she asked.

The Turk smiled grimly. "Oh yes; I had him bow-strung two years ago."

"Yes; I knew it. Well, he was my lover, and for what you did to him I lured you into this trap. Sarakunoff, I leave him to you."

The outlaw closed his big hand on the Pascha's throat with a firmer grasp. "Go in peace, Queen Marozia," he said, "this man is mine."

V

LEETA, THE SNAKE CHARMER

V

LEETA, THE SNAKE CHARMER

PHILIPPOPOLIS was gay beyond its usual wont. Men of many nationalities patrolled the ill-lit streets of the ancient city. Most men who had anything to lose were careful not to wander about alone, for the place had an evil reputation.

There were Greeks there who would slip a knife up to the hilt between a pilgrim's ribs for a small sum of money. There were Armenians at every alley way who would have small compunction about ending a person's earthly troubles if the wage offered was large enough to counterbalance the risk. Bravos from Hungary, swarthy-faced, beetle-browed fellows, with wondrous white teeth and big, flashing, black eyes, lounged about ready to take part in any person's quarrel, providing there was a flask of wine and a few gold pieces attached to the trouble.

Truculent-looking blades from Montenegro

swaggered about the streets, or lounged in dimly-lit cafés ready for any mischief. Stern-eyed Turks, with watchful eyes and silent tongues, grouped themselves together, or kept as much as possible to the well-lit parts of the city, not being over-anxious to make a start for Paradise in spite of the charms of Houris.

They were merchants and men of considerable substance for the most part those Turks, and bad men to fasten a quarrel upon. All their lives had been spent close to the border, and they knew what a small thing would start a blaze of trouble when men were ripe for it.

Most of them had heard the midnight call to arms more than once, and had known what it was to stand blade in hand in their own doorways. Some of them, in times past, had thrown bales of goods across doorways, and, kneeling by open windows, had used their long guns, muzzle-loading and mother-of-pearl inlaid, upon mobs in the street. Curious old guns they were, throwing a soft lead bullet about as big as a man's thumb, a bullet that usually opened out as soon as it hit a man, making a wound which a copper penny would scarce cover.

But profits were big on the border, and the Turk was ready to run the risks for the sake

of the gains. Bulgarian military officers were strongly in evidence in Philippopolis, splendid, fellows, silent, hard as granite, bold, alert, confident, neither seeking trouble nor stepping aside too gingerly to avoid it. Good men, these, for a brawler to let alone.

There were Servians in military uniforms also, aping the airs and refinements of Paris. Far too prone to clap a hand to a sword-hilt, or to twist a moustache fiercely; much given to clicking spurs together, as they do in Berlin after a long bout with lager beer-bottles—a poor lot, these Servians, quicker with tongue than with steel, having a better stomach for making a quarrel than for seeing it out to the bitter end.

Of Jews there was no end—Jew merchants, Jew pedlars, Jew money-lenders, Jew touts and guides. Jew horse-sellers and buyers. Here and there an Austrian, arrogant, haughty, over-bearing, thinking the world his and his Emperor's; a few Russians, easy-going, careless, and overfond of champagne and the dice box—easy fellows to get along with in trade or pleasure. Women of many nationalities flitted about, and each clung to the dress of her native land. Many notables were in Philippopolis, for although there was to be no formal meetings, none at least that the world knew anything about, yet it was a

matter of common knowledge that matters relative to a great upheaval would in all probability shape themselves this spring in Philippopolis. Tzontchieff, the celebrated military adviser and leader of the Macedonian revolutionaries, was there; so was the greatest of their guerilla leaders, Boris Saraboff. Fighting men and diplomats from Servia, Hungary, Roumania, Macedonia, Austria, Russia, Turkey, and Greece, were in evidence, and more than one prince and princeling who had hopes and aspirations in connection with thrones.

And amidst all these came Marozia the Beautiful, to make her own plots and mine and countermine the plots of others—and none held her cheaply. Her clever brain and her limitless courage and audacity were known to all, for she had steered her barque amidst stormy waters too well and too often for the most skilful intriguers to overlook or despise her.

It was well known that she would stop at nothing to gain her ends. She would use all her weapons mercilessly; her wisdom, her wit, her personal charm, her beauty—all these things she would throw into the balance in the fight for power.

It was not her desire to see Bulgaria grow bigger and stronger, and rumour had it that

there was just a possibility that pressure might soon be brought upon Turkey to hand Macedonia over to Bulgarian rule. In that case, many argued that the next step would be the absorption of Servia by Bulgaria, with the triple states under one crown; and right well Marozia knew that neither she nor Mabon, her lord, would be chosen by the Bulgarian and Macedonian people to rule over them.

It was early in the evening when two officers approached the house of Stergoff, the Jew, who had horses and carriages for hire. They walked like men who fancied they had business of importance on hand.

"Why is Marozia the Queen sending us with dispatches to this outlying village?" whispered one.

His comrade shrugged his shoulders, "Perhaps it is a dispatch of moment that we convey; possibly it is a love letter to one of her many worshippers. One never knows when one is in the service of Marozia. All that I do know is that we have to get horses and a carriage from this accursed Jew; and he will rob us in the matter of charges I am assured, for I have had dealings with him before."

They rapped loudly at the Jew's door with the pommels of their swords, and swore

savagely because it did not fly open on the instant. The door opened at last, and a man in the prime of life appeared, carrying a lantern, which he held so that he could scrutinise his visitors very effectively whilst screening his own face. This was a necessary precaution, for of all men in Philippopolis a Jew had to be on guard against violence. The Turks loathed them, the Greeks hated them, the other sections of the community despised them and despoiled them, and yet the Jews flourished and grew rich.

Having satisfied himself that his visitors had come upon an honest errand, the Hebrew invited them to enter his dwelling. Then he became all obsequiousness. Stroking his beard, he asked their Excellencies what commands of theirs he—the most unworthy of his tribe—might have the honour of carrying into effect.

"We want four good horses, a carriage, and a postillion," said one of the officers brusquely, breaking in upon the Jew's flow of speech. And he added: "The horses must be good."

The Jew raised his hands, palm outwards, above his head.

"Horses! Did their Excellencies demand horses?"

He had in his stable at that moment four of the fleetest and best that had ever been foaled, swift as the wind, strong as the storm, un-

tamable in spirit. He would show them to the illustrious Excellencies, and dumbfound them with admiration.

A carriage did their Highnesses want? A palace on wheels? They could have it. He had the most sumptuous thing of the kind to be found in the Near East. A driver with a sure hand and a perfect knowledge of the roads. Who, he asked, could drive better than he himself? Who knew the roads as he knew them? Had he not travelled them night and day, summer and winter, since childhood? And his son Isaac, was he not peerless amongst postillions? And all this is at the command of the most illustrious Excellencies for——

"We will see the horses first and talk about a price later," was the curt answer. "Lead the way to the stable, Jew."

At the stable-door the Hebrew cried warningly: "Have a care, your Excellencies, have a care. The little one, the grey one, the fierce one, is nearest the door. 'Heart of Fire,' the neighbours call him. He is a tornado in the hide of a horse."

He lifted the light high, and the officers saw "Heart of Fire" half-standing, half-leaning against the shaky wall that divided the stall from another. It was as mean a beast to look at as ever horse-dealer wasted praise upon.

As the Hebrew went near the animal with

exaggerated signs of mingled fear and affection, the scarecrow screwed its head round from the manger, with a wisp of hay dangling from its immense yellow teeth, which told that its age was a matter for mental arithmetic. Its ribs were nearly through its mangy hide, and there was a gash in its near foreknee that testified dumbly to the creature's capacity to fall down at a moment's notice.

The Jew went towards the nightmare on tiptoe, with his right hand outstretched — murmuring soothing things as if in terror of his life. "Steady, my wild one! Gently, gently, my wayward one! Sh-ss, sh-ss, my pride, my hope!" "Heart of Fire" laid one ear back, and absolutely yawned, looking at that moment as spiritless an equine as ever courted the knacker's knife.

One of the officers, growing tired of the farce, stepped forward and savagely prodded "Heart of Fire" in the flank with his scabbard. Instead of lashing out with both heels and kicking half the tumble-down stable into ruins, "Heart of Fire" flicked his scraggy tail tamely and let his head droop dejectedly, and prepared to go to sleep.

With a furious oath the officer raised the scabbard and struck the Jew several sounding blows across the shoulders, crying: "Dog of

a Jew! Is this the wild hurricane of a horse you would provide us with? Is this the creature that is fleeter than the wind, and wild as the storm? Show us the others, or we will take the skin from your body."

The Hebrew protested and cringed beneath the hail of blows, and at last declared that some wealthy merchants had hired his good team; and as they had paid a deposit he could not break faith with them. The visitors vowed that they would serve the merchants as they had served him if they came upon the scene, and bade the Jew bring forth his best without delay. As he was in fear of further violence, he did as he was bidden, and in a very short time the carriage rolled out of the yard, with the Jew on the box and the bullies inside.

Half an hour later two merchants arrived and demanded a carriage and team from the Jew's wife. She, poor woman, could do nothing but tell them what had happened. They cut short her lamentations, the spokesman saying: "Come quickly, woman; tell us two things — firstly, where did the officers bid your husband drive them? secondly, will 'Heart of Fire' carry a man and a saddle, and have you another horse that will do the same?"

Something in the speaker's tone and manner

told the Jewess, who had a marvellously quick ear, that these so-called merchants were not what they seemed. Therefore, she deemed it expedient to be truthful. She gave them the address they sought, and then said: "The horses in the stalls are good enough to carry you to the next villayet if you spur them well; and good horses can be obtained there."

"That means that your horses will carry us three leagues and no more? Well, we cannot choose, so we take what lies to our hand."

They saddled the sorry animals and rode off, and "Heart of Fire," true to his general appearance, did his best to break his own neck and his rider's half a dozen times during the journey. At the next villayet the merchants were more fortunate.

They obtained a couple of good horses, and rode swiftly and silently. Evidently they knew what they had to do, and did not need to discuss matters. In three hours they caught the Jew's carriage, and one riding upon each side they commanded the driver to halt. Then, thrusting a pistol into each window, they bade the inmates step out, one at a time.

This order was obeyed with alacrity, though the men in the carriage blustered with their hands on their sword hilts.

"Come, come, to-night we do the talking, Capitan Pero," remarked one of the merchants

with an ill-concealed sneer, "so hold your peace."

"What do you require of us?" was the sulky rejoinder.

"We want the letter you are carrying for Marozia the Queen."

"You shall have my life first."

"As you please," was the incisive answer, and a pistol was pointed straight at the Captain's head.

"I would as soon take it from you dead as living; but I shall take it."

The fierce Captain promptly thrust his left hand into his tunic and, drawing forth a letter, handed it with many curses to the horsemen, who immediately tore it open and examined it.

"This is all we need!" he exclaimed to his comrade. "We have the Queen in a cleft stick now. Gentlemen, you can drive on."

When the carriage had moved away the second man said to the one who held the letter: "Marozia has played us false, then?"

"She has given all our plans away to her Austrian lover," was the answer. "This letter proves it to the hilt. She means to bring about war between Bulgaria and Turkey. Out of the ruins she hopes to pick something to her own advantage."

"War with Bulgaria will not suit us just at present," answered his comrade, "for the

Russian will take sides with Bulgaria, and Turkey has no money."

"We must remove this woman." His companion touched his knife-belt hilt significantly. "That way or another, but however it is done it must be done to-night. Her presence in Philippopolis to-morrow may mean war. She is the cleverest woman in the world, and the most dangerous. Her one weakness is a handsome man. I knew that was so, that was why I had this splendidly handsome Austrian watched so closely. She is to be at the masked ball to-night. She is there now dressed as Leeta, the snake charmer; I have that from a sure hand. Come along, this must be Marozia's last dance."

They touched their horses with the spurs, and broke into a canter. But one other man was riding in the same direction, a grand looking man, superbly mounted. It was Marozia's handsome Austrian lover, to whom the two officers had told the tale of the highway robbery. He was a diplomat, and besides, he was madly smitten by the wayward Queen's charms. Arriving in Philippopolis he searched for and quickly found Leeta, the beautiful snake charmer, whose personal resemblance to Marozia was wonderful. He knew her well, and it did not take him long to persuade her to don a mask and accompany

him to the ball. Marozia the Queen saw her own double dancing with a masked man, whose identity she was not slow to guess, and her acute brain told her that her plans had miscarried, else this man would not be dancing in Philippopolis.

In the dance she brushed close to him and whispered quickly, "Why are you here?"

"Fly for your life!" he whispered; "Turkey knows all."

Marozia was a bold woman, but she paled at those words.

"And you?" she whispered.

"I will meet you in Vienna," he answered. "For God's sake fly."

"I will await you there," she cried. "Do not keep me waiting long."

The Turkish agents who were watching the dancers were nonplussed to see a pair of snake charmers almost exactly alike in dress, height, and carriage.

"Which is the Queen?" asked one to the other.

Then his eyes fell upon the Austrian, and he laughed. "That is the Queen," said he. "The one with the tall man in the red mask—watch her." And that was how Marozia the Queen was enabled to slip away unmolested, and a few hours put her out of the reach of the Turkish arms.

The men were watching her double, who danced almost continually with the Austrian. She chattered lightly to him and laughed, for she loved the dance. But he, the fine, handsome fellow was thinking of his last words to Marozia, "I will meet you in Vienna," and of the dazzling smile she had given him in return.

Sitting out a dance in a shaded alcove, some two hours after Marozia's departure, the joyous Leeta whispered that she would like some sherbet, for the room was ill-ventilated and hot.

The Austrian smiled, and beckoning an attendant ordered two glasses of sherbet with ice in it.

A man standing close by followed the attendant, and in menacing tones whispered an order in his ear, at the same time slipping a powder into his hand. It was the same man who had opened the letter of Marozia the Queen upon the highway.

The attendant shivered and obeyed the whispered command. Before he took the drink to the two merrymakers in the alcove he had placed half of the powder in each glass. Shortly afterwards, two other lovers seeking the same alcove came across two bodies very still and very rigid, and they stopped the dance with wild cries of terror.

"Ah!" said one of the Turkish emissaries to the other, "they have found the dead body of Marozia and her Austrian lover; let us be moving. Our work is done. Marozia has danced her last dance."

But at that moment the wayward Queen was many a league away speeding to safety. Once again a man had stood between her and the penalty of her misdeeds, and had given a life for her. But the end was not far off for her, though she did not know it as she chuckled over her scheming.

VI

A STRONG MAN'S WOOING

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RELO village was lying quiet and quaint in the moonlight, an old-world, out-of-the-way place on the Bulgarian side of the Macedonian border.

It might have gone to sleep after the Roman legions tramped through, and only just have awakened. Everything in it was out of date in appearance. Nothing spoke of the passing of the ages.

The little wine cafés, open full front to the streets, where the peasants sat drinking their white wine in their sheepskin coats and caps, their knee-breeches, and shoes turned up at the point, with untanned leather straps crossing and recrossing each other from ankle to knee, were just as they had been when the barbarians overran Europe. The little blacksmith's shops, where the gipsies worked at everything, from the mending of an old iron pot, to the making of horseshoes, and the welding of swords and daggers, were as crude as in the days of the Crusaders.

Dwelling-houses and shops lined both sides of the rough causeway, that lay at the feet of the mountains on which Turkish sentinel-fires burnt eternally through the long summer nights. Queer little houses, with balconies that hung far over the narrow paths below, marked the homes of the more important of the village folk. Men and women leant against these balcony - rails and smoked cigarettes made of home-grown tobacco, and at times chatted with neighbours across the way, or else they sang the wild border songs full of love and battle—songs that made a stranger fancy he could hear the clash of steel, the tread of tramping feet, the hoof-strokes of galloping squadrons, and the laughing and the sighing of women.

Lights flickered in nearly every window, but there were no lamps in the street, and every now and again some village Don Juan, muffled so as to escape detection, might have been seen lurking in the shadows, or stealing along the street as near the sheltering walls as his feet could take him. Very careful in their love-making were those men, for there were no divorce laws in Relo — only the divorce that comes when the knife is driven hard home to the hilt, or the crack of a pistol proves virtue's advocate against illicit love.

A merry, hard-working, honest set of folk

were these mountain men; but their blood was hot as lava, and their passions apt to flame up like forest fires, and when that happened it was good to be out of the way, for blood is apt to be spilt on such occasions. Now and then a brown-cowled monk from the neighbouring monastery flitted by, making but little noise as he passed upon his errand of mercy. Very often the cowl and cloak hid the well-armed figure of some leader of the Macedonian insurgent bands, bent upon a warlike mission—for Relo was a famous haunt of the wild mountain-men, who were always ready to volunteer to do battle with the Turks when the ruthless soldiery of the Sultan lit the valleys with burning homesteads, which was not at all a rare occurrence.

But on this night there were other folk afoot in the streets of Relo to attract the attention of the villagers. A little party of well-dressed people, who were evidently bent solely upon pleasure. One of these merry-makers was a woman in the full flush of her young matronhood; a ripe, rich beauty of face, and a wonderfully handsome figure was her birthright, and she seemed to be exercising her charms to the full extent of her powers upon a stalwart man who walked beside her. That her cavalier was a soldier any one could have told at a glance by his carriage, even

though he was dressed in mufti. That he was bewitched by his fair companion any person who could hear the tones of his voice, and see the play of his features, would have discovered instantly.

As the revellers passed under the balcony that overhung the lower storey of the house of Hia Nikoloff, the tobacco-grower, three or four men, who had been idling up there smoking cigarettes most of the evening, leant over the rail and watched the group in the street.

"There can be no doubt it is Marozia the Queen," said one. Then he added, with an oath: "She may be Queen, but it is not queenly to do as she is doing to-night."

"It would be bad enough if the man at her side was her husband, instead of her lover," answered one of the others. "It is lowering to the dignity of our people to see her flitting about on foot in the moonlight like any peasant woman."

"Who is the man?" demanded one who had not hitherto spoken. "I thought her latest lover was the black - moustached Russian; but this is no Muscovite."

"Her *latest* lover!" sneered the man who had first spoken. "How long does a lover last with Marozia the Queen? She is as fickle as she is beautiful."

"Is this the Austrian who was dangling about her in Paris last winter, I wonder?" put in another.

"You are wrong in that guess," whispered one. "I knew the Austrian by sight, and he is not built like this man. This is a new toy."

"A new toy—yes!" sneered one. "And she will throw him away as soon as her fancy changes."

"These doings will lead to trouble yet, unless Her Majesty puts a bridle upon her pleasures."

"She will never do that, my friend. She is reckless and fearless."

"She may find others as reckless as herself," was the dark answer. "It is bad enough for her to play the light o' love in our own country, but it is past all bearing that she should come here and make us a by-word for these Bulgars and Macedonians."

"How can we alter it? She is Queen, and queens can do no wrong," was the sneering retort.

As these words left the speaker's lips a merry peal of laughter came rippling upwards from the street below. It was Marozia the Queen enjoying some jest uttered by the tall cavalier at her side.

The watchers on the balcony swore fiercely

in low tones, for they belonged to the conspirators' party, and some of them were later destined to play a part in one of the most brutal butcheries known to modern times.

They hated the gloriously lovely Queen, because in all her *amours* she favoured none of them, and openly displayed her contempt for them. A day was coming when she would pay for that contempt with her life. She was to learn that little souls can seethe with black and bitter hate; and that white, full bosom of hers, that to-night is rising and falling as she laughs joyously, was to be gashed with many a knife and dagger-thrust, but not in the Perrin Mountains, not in the Bulgar village, though the conspirators were there for the purpose of doing her to death if they could only find fitting opportunity and pretext.

Marozia the Queen and her escort passed on. At the far end of the village, where the road winds upwards towards the monastery, she and the tall man parted from the rest of the company; for this royal coquette could be as imprudent as any peasant lass who worked in the rose-gardens when the mood was upon her, and it was upon her this night.

Side by side the lovers walked up that winding road, where the scented pine-trees cast deep shadows. The man was holding

the woman's hand and pleading in passionate tones, telling the old, old tale that has been told so often in the moonlight when folly and beauty have met.

Wondrously beautiful looked Marozia the Queen. Her big eyes were full of the witchery that all women of her sort, since Cleopatra's day, have owned. Her red lips were full and moist; her hair fluttered in the night wind. The snowy whiteness of her full, round throat showed plainly when the soft black wrapper fell down upon her shoulders; and the man, looking at her with burning eyes, cared nothing that she was a Queen. To him she was a woman, a glorious, glowing creature of flesh and blood.

He paused and faced her, and for a moment the two looked into each other's eyes. Then, without a word the man took her in his strong arms and kissed the moisture from her lips, kissed her half fiercely; and she, who had made men tremble and plead with her for her favours, found this bold wooing stir her wild blood. He drew her head to his shoulders and turned her face up so that the moonlight fell upon it. Then, as he gazed on her beauty, he went mad once more, and kissed her upon the lips, the eyes, the cheeks—kissed her as if he could have eaten her red-and-white loveliness, and as he held her a man, running strongly,

dashed around the curve in the mountain pass just behind them—a man running with a purpose, from the village of Relo.

The wooer swung the woman behind him and faced the newcomer, standing so that his body shielded her from danger. A bad man he might be, but he was a brave one.

The messenger paused, panting heavily, proving that he had been running at the top of his speed. "Excellency," he cried, speaking English with a strong Bulgarian accent, "Excellency, the enemies of the Queen are following you. They will be here in a minute."

The lover spoke in the same tongue, only he spoke it as a native. "Velo," he said, "the *Queen* is not here."

The man Velo gazed with all his eyes. "Not here, Excellency?"

"No; this is one of the Queen's ladies, Velo. Marozia the Queen is safe in her own apartments."

Velo gaped for a moment, then the meaning of it all came to him. "That is so, Excellency. I was a blind bat not to see as much for myself. But, Excellency, the Queen's enemies will be here in a few seconds, and they are many. They will show no mercy to you, or to the Que——, to the lady."

"Can we reach the monastery before them?"

"No, Excellency; the lady cannot climb fast enough."

"Is there any other pass, Velo?"

"None, Excellency."

"Velo!"

"Yes, Excellency."

"We have fought against the Turks side by side, you and I."

"That is so, Excellency."

"Then take this lady to the monastery, remain on guard all night, and in the morning see her to safety with some of your mountain-men. I will stay and hold this path."

Velo showed his white teeth in a grin of pleasure as he quickly unlinked his yataghan, and passed it to the man who had called him comrade.

Marozia the Queen put her hand upon the muscular arm of the man who a minute before had kissed her. "They will surely kill you!" she said.

He smiled back in her face. "What does it matter?" he said. "I have lived a lifetime to-night; I have drained pleasure to the dregs. Now, go with Velo to safety, for I hear the sound of coming feet."

Marozia the Queen lifted her winsome face, caring nothing that Velo, the mountaineer, was standing by, and she kissed the adventurer on the mouth.

"Come," said Velo, "the wolves are upon us."

He took the Queen by the hand, and together they ran in and out amongst the moonlight and the shadows.

The man left alone in the pass tossed off his coat, and, baring his right arm to the elbow, stood with his yataghan, waiting. He had not long to wait. The pursuers came on at the double, three abreast. They did not hesitate when they saw the grim, motionless figure, but, steel in hand, charged on.

He sprang to meet them. With a mighty sweep of his blade—a cavalryman's stroke—he checked the rush; and then, thrusting, parrying, attacking, retreating, he fought to save the life and fair fame of the royal coquette. He fought until the sweat dripped from his brow and trickled down his neck—fought silently, as men do who know there is no hope, yet have no fear.

One man, rasher than the others, or bolder, met his point full, and went down, first upon one knee, then upon his hands and knees, finally he slid forward and lay very still. But there were others behind to take his place.

The adventurer fought on. Blood was mingling with the sweat that dripped from him; his arm could barely lift the steel. He gathered himself together for one last effort,

and, careless of his life, sprang right amongst them, hewing with all the might that was in him at the circling foes. Steel flickered on all sides in the moonlight, like tongues of flame in a burning barn. Then the man went down. The avengers gazed at him where he lay; then they wiped their blades upon their cloaks, and, picking up their own men, went away, leaving the adventurer lying where he had fallen.

Next day the newspapers told the world that there had been another outrage in the Perrin Mountains by Macedonian brigands; but Marozia the Queen could have told a different story.

VII

LOVE IN A NUT-SHELL

VII

LOVE IN A NUT-SHELL

"So that is Marozia the Queen, is it, comrade? Pouff! I've seen many fairer women on the mountain side. May I eat black bread without soup all my days if I can see what there is in her to drive men mad with love. There are a dozen wenches in this market-place of Sofia to-day as handsome as she is."

"She has beautiful eyes; you cannot deny that, friend. And a well-formed figure also, what is the use of faulting; she is Marozia, and men who know her go drunken with her witchery."

"Anything with a petticoat upon it will drive some men drunken, just as the scent of blood upon the air will drive some oxen crazy. I heard a priest say this morning that she is the devil in disguise. Well, if that be so, half the young bloods in Bulgaria are going to the devil."

"Some of you gossips will get your tongues slit," growled a man who was standing near

the talkative group; "why can you not attend to your own affairs, and let Marozia the Queen mend or break her own business? She would not wipe her shoes on the beard of the best man amongst you all, and you know it."

The knot of peasants turned wrathfully upon the speaker, more than one of them laying hand to knife-hilt ominously, as they answered his jibe with fiery retorts. But he made light of their wrath. He was a thick-set fellow in the prime of life, and as he stood in the market-place balancing himself firmly on his strong legs, he looked like a man quite capable of holding his own in any *melée* that might arise. They were a bold independent lot of fellows, mostly from the hills near Sofia, who had come to the market to dispose of the produce of their tiny farms, orchards, and vineyards, and it ruffled their fiery tempers to be told that they must put a bridle on their tongues.

"Varco has become a miracle of politeness since he married," jeered one, pointing a big forefinger at the man who had broken in upon their chatter.

"Marriage seems to have changed him," sneered another. "Time was when his words were not always picked out with care like apples one is going to take to the market."

"Ah! but then Varco was a free lance

on the borders, taking his toll of Turk and Christian alike. Now he is a family man, and has a good farm of his own, and such responsibilities cool the warmest blood," cried another, throwing a world of mock pity into his voice. "Time was," he added, "when Varco could cry 'Halt! stand and deliver,' as gruffly as any man between Sofia and Constantinople."

The man addressed as Varco grinned good-humouredly into the angry faces. "The past is dead," said he; "let the grass grow over it. If I ever robbed any, I never robbed the poor, and I never took toll from an unarmed man; as for being tamed, well that is as it may be, but I hate to hear grown men talking of a woman—and such a woman."

"Has she bitten you, Varco, you of all men?" cried one of the group. "What magic is in the woman, that she can draw even so bold a fellow to her side with a glance?"

"Magic; the only magic I know of is her courage," retorted Varco; "she has more of that in her little finger than any man I ever knew could carry in his whole body. If she were a man she would weld all these petty states together, as Beltoo, the smith, there, welds hot iron; she would build up a nation in the Balkans that would crush Austria, as a steer's hoof crushes a ripe apple."

"If she has the wit as well as the courage, Varco, what does it matter if she be man or woman? Women have made history before to-day," snapped Beltoo, the smith.

Varco laughed quietly. "All women who rule come to grief sooner or later," he chuckled; "history teaches us that."

"I do not see why they should," stormed one of his hearers.

"That is because you know so little of women," was the retort; "a woman even in the most dangerous moments will turn aside from her ambitions to glut her eyes with love, and love blinds even the wisest."

"Who are those men with her now, Varco?"

Varco shrugged his broad shoulders. "Who they are I do not know; but what they are, any man who has not lived a lifetime in one spot can tell at a glance. They are adventurers from several countries; soldiers who have made their own nests too warm for them — such flock to Marozia's court in the hope of lifting themselves out of the mire once more."

"They came to her to use her, Varco."

"They do not often gain much for their pains then; ravens do not grow fat on what they plunder from an eagle's eyrie."

Whilst the folk were discussing her in this free and easy fashion, Marozia stood and

watched the life of the market-place, her foreign friends around her. One of these was a man in the noon of life, a thick-set man with an almost gigantic pair of shoulders. So broad across the chest was he, that his width made him appear very short of stature; it was only when he stood near other men that a beholder could have seen that he was quite of the average height of humanity. He had very small feet, large hands, a waist that was very nearly womanish. A neck like a pillar of granite, and a good-looking face that was pleasing to the eye of men or maids. He was very fair, this unknown man, grey-eyed, with a yellow moustache that drooped right down below his square chin. He had the confident, almost careless carriage of a man absolutely sure of himself in every way. This was Oscar Monthee, a son of old Norway. Though dressed in mufti he carried the stamp of the tried campaigner in his every movement. A very understandable matter considering that he had fought half over the world at one time or another. In Cuba he had fought for America against the Spaniards. In China he had led a brigade against the Japanese, and he had carried a sword for Russia against the Turks. As reckless a free lance as ever buckled on blade, and as good and loyal a comrade as man ever had.

Fate had drifted him to the East, and there he had met Marozia, and the wilful beauty had caressed him with her eyes, much to the annoyance of those other adventurers who hoped to bask in her smiles.

They gave him curt welcome at the Court, and black looks, and it was as much their frowns as Marozia's smiles that induced him to stay, for Oscar Monthee was the last man living to move on, because of other men's scowling brows.

He had that in his blood which made peril as sweet to him as honey in the comb is to the ant. When Marozia determined to leave the kingdom for a little time for the purpose of visiting Bulgaria she had broken up her court. That was one of her modes of getting rid of people of whom she had grown tired, one or two of the more ardent of her admirers had managed to find some excuse for visiting Sofia during her stay in that city, and Oscar Monthee was of the number.

He had, or he fancied he had, good reasons for believing that he would be welcome. Marozia was full of wild spirits this day. It was part of her policy to go thus amongst the market folk just as if she was one of the people. Other rulers held themselves aloof from the populace, Marozia, when the mood was upon her, would go from one stall to

the other and chat for a while with old or young, enquiring into the state of the country, asking after the health and welfare of families, for it was part of her policy to win the common people over to her if she could do so without exciting suspicion. Sometimes she made small purchases, but not often; once she stopped in front of a stall over which a tall, gaunt, old peasant woman presided. "Ah, Katherine," she said, "so you are still in the market-place, busy as of old."

The woman answered pleasantly enough that she was always at her post, seeing that was the only way in which she could make a livelihood.

Marozia picked up a small basket of almonds from the stall, and selecting a few, handed them with light laughter to the gentlemen by whom she was surrounded.

They took the Queen's gift, entering into the spirit of the thing like so many school-boys out for a frolic. Only the old woman noticed that when she gave a small handful of almonds to Oscar Monthee her shapely hand seemed to linger in his for a longer period than the act warranted.

A moment or two later the party dispersed, and Varco, the peasant farmer, happened to find himself in a narrow street just beyond the market-place. He looked up lazily as he

sauntered on, and beheld the sign of the "Red Crab." He gave a sigh of content, and turned in at the ever-open door, and seating himself at a table called for a bottle of white wine.

As he sat waiting for the wine he rolled a cigarette deftly in his fingers. Suddenly his quick eyes fell upon the form of a man who sat alone at a small table. The man was cracking almonds with his teeth. "That's the fellow I saw with Queen Marozia in the market-place a few moments back," mused Varco.

And out of mere curiosity he watched the other man closely. All at once he saw the man he was watching draw a cracked almond very carefully from under his big, yellow moustache. Varco saw him part the broken shells with deft fingers and draw out a tiny piece of white paper closely folded. A smile ran over Varco's dark face. "Ah," he muttered, "so that was why Marozia the Queen gave you the almonds, was it? a case of love in a nut-shell."

Varco had quick wits; when he had been a mountain brigand, before he settled down and became a family man and a farmer, his wits had saved his neck more than once. When the man had glanced at his love-letter he looked up swiftly, but Varco was minutely and critically surveying the newly-rolled cigarette in his fingers, still he had time to

notice all that followed out of the corners of his eyes, a trick he had cultivated before he became a farmer.

The man with the yellow moustache, who was none other than Oscar Monthee, read his note once more, smiling as he did so; then he wrote an answer, folded the paper very deftly, and opening an almond with the edge of his knife abstracted the kernel and placed the note inside, then he gummed the shells together, and, finishing his wine, walked out jauntily.

Varco rose and followed at a discreet distance until he saw his man stop in front of a fruit-seller's stall in the market-place, and pass the old woman an almond.

He was no mischief-maker, this good Varco; he had satisfied his curiosity, and was content to keep his mouth very close; he did not intend to trade upon his knowledge. Varco was not that sort.

The next day and for many days, however, he watched the comedy with amusement. He soon knew that the old woman at the fruit-stall was in Marozia's pay, and it tickled Varco's sense of humour to note the change and interchange of letters, each wrapped in its own nut-shell. One morning as Varco was passing the fruit-stall he saw that for some reason or another the old peasant dame was

in terrible distress. He knew her very well, as he knew everybody in those parts.

"What ails you, mother?" he cried, in his gruff way.

The dame looked hard at him. "I am in a cleft stick, Varco," said she; "time was when I would sooner have told you of my troubles than any man between the four borders."

"Well, mother, and why not tell me now? I am the same man that you once knew."

"I am not so sure of that, Varco, you do not go amongst your old friends as you did of old time."

"Pish, I do not go amongst them, mother, because I do not follow the same trade nowadays; but for all that I would not fail to help one of them in need."

"You were the boldest of them always, Varco. I wish that I could trust you now," whispered the dame, gazing at him keenly from under her bonny brows.

"Well, mother, why don't you?"

"Because I fear that you have forgotten that you were once one of us."

"I shall never forget that," was the quiet reply; "nor shall I forget that it was your husband that carried me on his shoulders through the mountains when the snow was knee deep and I had a bullet from a border guardsman's rifle in my ribs."

"You remember that, Varco?"

"Yes, mother, and I remember also that it was you who nursed me back to strength again at a time when the border guards were searching high and low for me, and a price, a big price, was on my head—if you want me, whistle, I'm your dog——" he turned as if to walk away.

"Varco."

"Yes, mother."

"Varco, I am in the pay of Marozia the Queen; I have eaten her salt."

"So, mother, she needs salt with her nuts, does she?"

The old woman glared. "Are you a spy, after all, Varco?"

"I use my eyes, mother, but not for ill—tell me your trouble."

"Marozia has a lover, Varco."

"She has many, mother."

"I only know of one, and he has been betrayed."

"The good-looking fellow with the broad shoulders and the yellow moustache?"

"That is the man, though, Mother of God, how you know so much puzzles me. He came every day and got an almond and left an almond, Varco."

"Yes, mother, and each almond contained a love-letter. I know that much."

"Other people know as much, though how the secret leaked out is more than I can tell, some one must watch Queen Marozia closely, or else some one in her service is not faithful; and Varco, her husband, the King, knows that she has been making love to 'Golden Moustache.'"

"How do you know that, mother?"

"Because he was waylaid this morning and nearly killed by some of the King's servants, but he managed to send me an almond with a note inside, saying: 'Warn Marozia the Queen; she is in danger.'"

"Have you warned her, mother?"

"No, Varco."

"Why not?"

"Because I only received the message a moment before I saw you, and Marozia is at the old hunting-lodge in the mountains, ten good leagues from here. It was there that she had to meet this lover of hers. You know the spot, Varco."

"I know it well, mother. Do you want me to get to saddle and warn her?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she is a woman. I do not think she loved this golden-moustached one overmuch, but there was danger in the fooling, and the danger appealed to her; as for him,

why, he is like you used to be before you married and became a caged bird, Varco. Hedge a woman round with spears and he would fret his soul to get to her; but let her run free and he would not give a golden Napoleon for her."

Varco laughed. "If I go to her, mother, I must have a talisman of some sort, or she will never believe me."

The woman drew an almond from the breast of her bodice. "Give her that," said she, "his letter to me is inside it; she will know you for a true man by that token."

Varco stepped rapidly away, and taking his horse from the inn rode off by a path that only the brigands and the contrabandists knew. He rode, as few would have dared to ride on such a track, and the good animal he bestrode must have fancied that Varco had taken up his old trade again. Marozia saw him come thundering down the side of a mountain like an avalanche, and her quick wit told her that this was no ordinary man, or an ordinary message. He did not waste words.

"The man you know of is wounded almost to the death; your foes will be here to confound you in a very few minutes. Here is my warrant for my speech, Queen Marozia." He thrust the almond into her hand as he spoke.

She read the note, then lifting her glorious eyes to his face, she said: "I know you for a true man, Varco; take me to safety."

He stiffened his foot in the stirrup, and, bending down, offered her his hand. Marozia took it, and placing her foot on his gave a little spring, and in a moment she was on the horse in front of him.

As they rode along by a secret path, she said: "I will get back to Sofia and confound my enemies; and later, when the fruit is ripe, I will avenge my friend."

"Yes," he answered; "you will do all that for you are Marozia, and I can easily put you unseen into Sofia whilst those who seek you are in the mountains; a closed carriage is easily obtained where I am going."

"You are a bold man, and a ready, Varco," the Queen whispered. "Tell me, is there anything on earth that you are afraid of?"

"Yes, Queen Marozia," he chuckled; "I would fear to let my wife see me riding through the pine forest with another woman where you are now—queen or peasant."

Marozia gave a little sigh and let her glossy head fall back upon his shoulder, her red lips upturned within an inch or two of his own. "I would give my kingdom to be loved so by a man worth calling a man," she whispered.

For a moment Varco bent his face over

hers, and the good horse came to a standstill; and all the time Marozia held clenched in her pretty hand the almond that the man had sent her, who was even then lying at the point of death with a slit between his ribs that a sword blade had made; and she smiled, knowing that the love of most men can be carried in a nut-shell.

VIII

THE DEATH OF MAROZIA

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THAT sooner or later some of Marozia's many enemies would overtake her, all men who had watched her career knew. She had played with men's hearts all her lifetime, using her baleful beauty and her nameless charm of manner to draw them to her; and when they had filled the whim of the hour, she had thrown them aside carelessly, indifferent concerning their love or hate.

Sometimes the motive that induced her to dally with a man was prompted by passion, for in those matters she was as a leaf that the whirlwind strikes. At such periods nothing could stay her. Once her wilful heart was set upon a man, she knew no law beyond her own impulse. She was volcanic in her hates as in her loves.

If a man pleased her fancy, for the time being the whole world revolved around that man. He was her sun by day, her star by

night, for she was swayed by her passions as a bough is swayed by the wind. And this weakness of hers made her whole life a network of inconsistencies.

But there were times when she played at being in love only for political purposes. When this was the case she seldom failed to achieve her ends, for she was a great actress, and could stimulate love's fears so nicely that even her women, lynx-eyed though they were, could seldom tell at the time whether Marozia was in earnest or not. It was only when she had used her dupes that she allowed her real feelings to be known.

Naturally some of her victims hated her with a bitter hate, for no man likes it to be known that a woman has wound him round her finger like a piece of silk. It was an article of faith with Marozia that all men, young, middle-aged, or old, are vain, and she played upon their vanity unceasingly. She could be imperious, seductive, gentle, haughty, timorous, daring, according to her scheming. She could coo like any wood-pigeon in the season of mating, and she could storm like a devil unchained. Had she gone upon the stage instead of playing for a throne, she would have made as great a name as Bernhardt made.

But the real drama appealed more strongly

to her virile temperament. She played for a throne—she won it; but the throne was not big enough for her. Had she been a man, she would have tried to unite all the paltry states in the Near East into one great nation, and if she had succeeded she would have aimed at the throne of the consolidated empire, for there was no limit to her ambitions. Before she met and conquered Mabon the King her name had been coupled with that of many men, two of whom were soldiers—vain, weak men both. She had used them and their love, guilty as it was, as stepping-stones to power, and when their usefulness was past she turned her glorious face away from them and wiped them out of the pages of her memory as if they had never existed.

But if she forgot, they did not. Neither of those men would have cut any figure in the world. The greatest claims to fame or notoriety either of them had was that in her hours of dalliance, a woman who was to fill a throne had once singled them out that they might revel in the glory of her charms, just as Cleopatra in her wayward moods might have dallied with some common man. They both considered themselves injured; both wore their wounds openly, that they might be pointed at in café's as men on whose shoulders a Queen had laid her glossy head.

As the years rolled by, and she rose higher and higher, their grievance grew greater and greater in their minds. They forgot that had she been true to either of them, she would have been a nameless nobody, for they were both powerless coxcombs without position, influence, or wealth. They were officers, drawing the wretched pay that Seconia gives her soldiers, and they had neither wit, courage, nor audacity to lift themselves out of the ruck.

Had Marozia failed in her scheming they would have been amongst the first to throw a jibe at her, as an old-time mistress whom they had discarded when carelessness took the place of passion; but when she rose and did not let them cling to her skirts to drag her down or lift themselves, then they nursed aggrievance, and looked upon themselves as men blighted by a woman's inconsistency.

At various times and seasons they sought to get the ear of Mabon the King, that they might poison his mind against the Queen. But all their scheming was vain. Mabon might listen and swear vengeance, he might go to Marozia with his heart full of rage and his blood hot with wrath, but, once in her presence, he became as clay in the hands of the potter. She could mould him to her will with a word, a look, a caress.

She would take his face between her soft white hands, and looking into his eyes, steal all his senses away. She would put her lips to his—those wonderful lips, so full and moist, like the petals of the pink peach flower with the honey in its heart, and he would forget all that her enemies had said concerning her.

She knew his weakness—knew how to play with him and make him a servant and a slave. He was born brave enough in a way, but he was weak. One clasp of her big, white, rounded arms would make him forget that he was a King, with kingly duties. Before he had wedded her all the influence of royal families in nearly every Court in Europe had been arrayed against her. Diplomats had schemed in vain to weaken her hold upon him. She had fought all the powers that arrayed themselves in opposition to her. Some she had cajoled, some she had flouted. One by one she drove them from the field until she laid the royal head upon her heart and called the King her husband.

Those men who had called her a wanton had a bad time within the Seconian border. Many appealed to Mabon, and he promised to stay his Consort's hand, but he bent to her will as a willow bends to the hand of the weavers of baskets, when she exercised over him that witchery for which there is no

name. It was to lead him to his death in the end, and this much must be said for him, even by his enemies, that when the end came, and he had to choose between a coward's flight and the desertion of the beautiful creature who had been his evil genius, to the tender mercies of her foes or death, he preferred death, and so stood and took the steel like a man—the one kingly act of his whole career. At one time the King had amongst his guards men who, whilst they drew his pay would have died for him or for his Queen, but by slow degrees all who were not Seconians were weeded out from the guards by those who were intriguing for Marozia's downfall.

For a long time she had combated this movement of her foes, but with the passing of time she grew contemptuous of their threats. She had been threatened so often by men who were really dangerous, and had escaped, that she grew to despise the fellows who strutted around her in her own Court, and most of all she despised the two who at one time had won favours from her. They each in turn tried to win their way back into her heart, content to play lap-dog to a queen; but she disdained them, for well she knew how they had talked of her in the cafés and the barracks.

They threatened her, and she laughed them to scorn. She could have exiled them with a word, but she would not dignify them with such a sentence. She played with them as some experimentalists love to play with dangerous chemicals, just to see how far she might dare to go.

"Put those two rats out of the way," said old Feneac, her chief adviser, just before he died. "Put your heel upon their necks, Marozia, and have done with them once and for all."

"No," she answered; "whilst I let those men move at large here in my own capital no one will believe half a word they utter, but if I lift my hand to them the world will say that their story is true, Feneac, else I should not have passed them by."

"Is there no truth in their tale?" the brutal old man had queried.

He knew well that there was, and Marozia knew that he knew. That was why the hot blood surged over her face and flooded her throat with colour.

"I was only a girl then," she murmured, "and I wanted toys."

"Toys and stepping-stones, my Queen," he answered. "If you will not get rid of them, at least see that the officers of the King's Guard are of other blood than those who

now hold office. There is one who has his eyes upon your husband's throne, and he will need tools and stepping-stones. Promise me this, and I will sleep in my grave in peace. I do not think I could lie quiet in my grave if that man filled the throne of Seconia."

"Rest in peace," she assured him. "Mabon and I are firm in the saddle now; none can shift us."

He lay still for a little while, then opening his tired eyes again, he said once more, "Marozia, rid yourself of the rats."

Then he passed away, but the wilful Queen would not take the old watch-dog's advice.

In a shabby little café a dozen men were sitting over their wine one night about a month after the death of Feneac, and amongst them were the two men he had called "the rats." They still wore the uniform of the King, and the wine they drank was paid for out of the soldier's pay they drew from him. All the sitters were uncovered, excepting one man, who kept his face muffled in the folds of his cloak. It was he who was speaking. "Sirs," he said, "there is but one way out of this matter, Marozia the Wanton must die."

"That has been said before by many men, and yet Marozia lives," answered one.

"Others have failed because they have not as much at stake as we have," rejoined the

muffled man. "Some have tried to get rid of her out of jealousy, others for political reasons, some have wanted her put aside because they loved this land of Seconia, and would not have a coquette on their country's throne. Others again have desired her death because she stood between them and their ambitions. Here to-night we unite all these reasons."

"Is there not one here who would gladly step over Marozia's dead body, and the dead body of her husband to a throne?" whispered one of the conspirators.

The muffled man muttered an oath, and his hand, dropping to his dagger hilt, he half drew the blade, but he put it back with an angry jerk, and clenching his fist, leant far over the table, and spoke in savage, menacing tones.

"Each plays for his own stake, let each look on his own winnings when the time comes, as for me for the time I bring pay."

He drew a heavy bag of metal from under his cloak and pushed a little pile of gold pieces in front of each man. Then there was silence for a while, broken at last by one who said: "I am willing to help in the removal of Marozia, but I have nothing against Mabon the King; why should he die? The

woman has bewitched him as she has bewitched many another man."

The muffled man laughed a harsh, grating laugh, which sounded strangely from amidst the folds of his cloak. "Let Mabon live by all means," he jeered. "Tell me how long will it be before the knife is at our own throats?" He rose. "I must go now, for I must be far away from Seconia when the—the —removal of the woman takes place."

Five nights later a missive was placed in the hands of Marozia the Queen. It ran: "Double the palace guards to-night, and put foreign officers in command of the watch. Do not despise this warning for the sake of the love that once was."

Marozia read the missive carefully; then she smiled disdainfully. "It is one of the 'rats' in a new rôle," she mused. "He has played many parts, loving, cringing, threatening, conspiring, now warning me. What rôle will he fill next, I wonder?"

She looked up and caught sight of herself in a mirror that threw back her reflection in full length. The sight pleased her. She was beautiful still, and beauty was power, and there was one coming to her Court shortly, on whom she meant to try all her witchery.

He was the monarch of a world-wide power

So she stood there dreaming, smiling at herself, and mapping out bigger schemes and greater spheres of influence.

A soft footfall on the heavy carpet startled her, and she turned to see the face of Mabon the King, and immediately she crushed the warning missive in her hand. "What is it?" she said. "I thought that we were not to meet again until to-morrow morning?"

He held a note out towards her. "This has just reached me," he said.

She waved it away with a pettish gesture of her hand. "Oh, another chapter of your Queen's misdeeds. I am very weary of it all, dear."

She put forth both her hands and drew him to her. "If you and I were only simple peasant folk," she said, "with a little farm of our own, how happy we might be."

He slipped his arm around her waist, and let his head rest upon her heaving bosom, whilst she toyed with his hair. Suddenly she slipped one hand under his chin, and, turning his face up, kissed him slowly with a long, languorous kiss; whilst a light like the light of the stars in tropical skies came into her heavy eyes.

Then he cried: "Marozia, some one warned me not to share the Queen's apartments to-night, that was why I came."

She told him then of the warning she had received.

"Will you double the guards?" he asked.

"Will you refuse to share the Queen's apartments to-night?" she cooed.

"I would sooner part with my crown," he cried gaily. "Marozia, you make me drunken with love," and, taking her hand in his, he led her to her chamber, that beautiful chamber, which neither King nor Queen should ever leave again.

A couple of hours passed by and the Queen awoke. For a moment she lay listening, whilst the young King slumbered, his hair shining dark against the snowy whiteness of the pillow. Then she touched him with a firm, cool hand and he awoke.

"What is it?"

"Our enemies are upon us."

He sprang from the bed, just as the door burst in with a crash.

The moonlight flashed across the bed-chamber, and revealed Marozia in her night-robe, tall and straight and lovely. Her head was up in proud defiance, her body poised firmly, one foot white and bare, was thrust from under the hem of her robe, her glossy hair streamed down her back in a long wave.

The King gave her just one look, then the man in him awoke, and he threw himself in

front of her, as the assassins burst in upon them.

The two foremost caught the Queen's eye, and with a mocking laugh she cried: "Old Feneac was right; the 'rats' have come."

Even the shadow of death could not daunt this woman.

With a wild beast snarl, one of the assassins, he who had been the first of all this beautiful, wilful, wayward creature's loves, cried to the King to stand aside and leave the Queen.

His answer was a man's answer. He sprang upon the fellow and dashed him headlong to the floor, and raised his voice in a rallying call to his guards. One or two who were faithful were down, dead, or dying. The rest had fled—cowards who could not be true to their salt.

Perhaps in that awful moment Marozia thought of that other soldier of the King's Guard, that once she had toyed with; the long-limbed Anglo-Saxon, who had stood between her and destruction in the Perrin Mountains beyond Relo. If so, she must have known that her sins had found her out. Had he been there to rally the guard, the men would have stood and died for the Queen, as common soldiers will when a stout heart leads them.

She saw the young King fall, she saw his

youthful limbs stretched out across the path that led to her. Then like wolves the cravens came upon her, and the first dagger that was plunged in her white breast was clenched in the hand of a man who years before had stolen on tiptoe under the blossoming fruit-tree to steal kisses from her lips.

IX

THE MYSTERY OF THE RED FARM

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THE MYSTERY OF THE RED FARM

Folks called it the Red Farm, because the farmhouse was built of reddish sandstone. When old Michael Geany, who had lived in it for thirty years, decided to leave Australia for the purpose of visiting his native land, a new tenant was found in the person of a young and extremely handsome woman, who rented the place under the name of Miss Neilson.

No one knew who she was, or where she came from, except possibly her Japanese servant; and as he either could not, or would not, speak a word of English, nothing was gained from him.

It soon became evident to the neighbours that the new tenant at Red Farm did not intend to do any farming, or receive any visitors. She kept two women, whom she had hired at Adelaide city, to do her house-

work, and a man to look after a black mare which she rode every day, hot or cold, rain or shine.

She never received any of the neighbours who called in a friendly fashion to bid her welcome to the district. When they rode up to the farm in their hearty Australian way, the Jap would open the door, take the offered card, bow like a wooden image, and shut the door in their faces.

She never went to church or chapel, and never spoke to a soul. Folks saw her in the early dawn, or in the glorious dusk of the warm summer evenings, flying along on the black hack that looked more like a race-horse than anything else. She had a fine figure, and even in that land of great horse-men she was voted a marvel in the saddle. She always jumped the mare over the stout gate that led to the farm, whether going out or going home; and at times the market gardeners going to the early market in the city saw her race the mare at the fences in the fields like a thing bewitched.

Naturally, she was the talk of the country-side, and men and women speculated as to whom she might be, and wondered whether a clue to the enigma would ever turn up; but they were like blind children groping in a strange field, and nothing came of their guess-

ing. On one point, however, they were all agreed, "She was not an Australian."

She did not look, walk, or ride like one. Beyond that none of them got; she was a living mystery.

When one of the servants visited the little township close by, curious women, and men also, for that matter, made a point of cross-examining them concerning the mistress of the Red Farm; but all that could be elicited from this source was that the "Mystery" spoke to no one, had no pets except her mare, and a pretty little Japanese spaniel, never received or wrote any letters or telegrams, and passed nearly the whole of the time in the house at the piano, singing in a language that the servants did not understand.

"She's got the most wonderful voice I've ever heard, and I've listened to Melba more than once," vouchsafed one of the abigails in a fit of unusual eloquence to the landlady of the Green Grasshopper Hotel.

The months went by, and the mystery was not solved, neither did the interest amongst the neighbours abate an atom, for curiosity is a hard thing to kill. Suddenly a new and startling interest was given to the Red Farm.

In the early hours of a summer's morning, a market gardener on his way cityward, was scared pretty nearly out of his senses by see-

ing two wild - eyed servants running bare-headed towards him on the highway.

He had scarce time to halt his horse ere they scrambled into his cart amongst the vegetables, gasping an incoherent tale of murder.

The police were soon upon the scene, and close on the heels of the police came Detective Loder, a young man who had studied for the Bar, but had thrown up that profession to become a tracker of men. He was not two-and-thirty at this time, and yet his record was exceedingly brilliant.

In the Red Farm they found the dead body of the beautiful woman who had been known as the "Mystery." Crouching close to her body, licking one of her small hands, was the little Japanese spaniel.

"Post your men so as to keep the country folk away, inspector," commanded Loder, "and leave the rest to me, please."

"Certainly; I've orders to let you have a free hand; but it's a clear case, clear as a pike-staff," was the inspector's answer.

"Yes," mused Loder; "these cases usually are, but what is your theory?"

"Why, the Jap servant has murdered his mistress, and has bolted."

"Are you sure the Jap has bolted?"

"Not a sign of him high or low."

"What was the Jap's motive?"

"Oh, the usual thing—loot."

Detective Loder pointed a silent finger at the rich gems on the dead woman's fingers, and passed on. The body of the beautiful woman had been found lying upon a couch in the drawing-room, fully clothed. The big eyes were wide open, the hands clenched. The lace upon the sleeves of her bodice was torn as if she had fought hard for life; on her white throat the imprint of a strong hand was plainly visible; the marks of every finger, and of the thumb, were there as if printed in wax.

Loder examined the marks with infinite care, and tried to fit his own hand to them, but could not. The space between the little finger and the thumb was too great. They were the marks of a left hand—a cruel, strong hand, that had not known how to flinch. Very carefully the detective examined the rooms; then he sent a note to a friend of his, a man who got his living making clay models.

The note was curt. It simply said: "Come at once with this messenger. I want you to make a perfect model of a dead woman's neck and throat."

Whilst the messenger was away on this errand Loder made an exhaustive search through the dead woman's personal property,

and when he had finished he said to the inspector of police: "The dead woman had a past, and a past she meant to conceal. I have not found a solitary letter of any kind excepting a few dry legal documents from her lawyer in Adelaide relating to this farm. There is no book from foreign parts with her name or any one else's name attached, no music of any sort near the piano; she must have played and sung from memory. Her linen is unmarked. Her boxes and trunks have all been carefully cleaned, so that no label is left to give me a clue to the land she came from. All this is not the work of chance. She had an enemy, or enemies, somewhere, and she feared being traced."

"Haven't you found a photograph of the woman anywhere?"

"Not one. But there are a dozen portraits of gentlemen, all taken by an amateur, and mounted on unstamped cards, so that they convey no clue. Still, I will keep them. They may prove useful."

The two men went to the room where the body lay, and Loder picked up the little Japanese spaniel. As he did so the creature moaned as if in pain.

"I'll take this to a 'vet,'" said the detective; "it's damaged."

As he spoke his friend, the modeller, arrived. He had often worked with Loder.

"Nasty business this, Loder—eh?"

"About as nasty as it can be. Come, and I'll show you what I want."

The two knelt over the body.

"See those marks?" It was Loder's question.

"Yes."

"Well, I want a clay model of this neck and throat, exact in every particular. Make it as if your life depended upon it, for a man's life may hang on your skill."

The modeller nodded.

"You will use pure white clay for the model, and place the marks of the fingers and thumb just as they are now on the woman's flesh. Use indigo for the bruises on the clay. Don't hurry; I want a perfect piece of work."

The modeller opened his bag and commenced at once. He was a swift, silent man who loathed argument.

Loder took the spaniel in his arms and went away to look for a veterinary surgeon.

"Broken ribs," said the "vet," after a quick examination. "Looks as if a man had kicked the dog."

The coroner's jury, who sat on the dead body of the mysterious woman, brought in a verdict of "Wilful Murder" against some

person unknown, and the police searched Australia from end to end for the Japanese servant, for he was the last person seen talking to the mistress of Red Farm on the night of the crime. No one had seen any stranger come or go; no one had heard any outcry. No one, in fact, knew anything. The lawyers who had let the farm had received their year's rent in advance, and had been satisfied to ask no questions.

The woman's banker knew absolutely nothing about her except that she had deposited a large sum of money at his bank in the name of Miss Evaline Neilson, most of which still remained unclaimed. Everybody, excepting Loder, believed the Jap had committed the crime; he held other views, which, however, he kept to himself.

Six months elapsed and not a clue was found, when Loder astonished his chief by asking to be sent to Tokio to search for the assassin.

"Got a clue—eh?" asked the great man.

"Hardly that; but if that Jap had remained in Australia alive, we would have heard of him by now. Tokio is the place to seek for him."

The chief, who believed in Loder, sent him to Japan by the next boat, and on the way over he reviewed all the clues in his possession.

First there was the model of the woman's throat and neck, with the finger-marks upon it; a photo of the victim, which he had had taken by the best expert in Australia; the rings the woman had worn; a tress of her hair; a minute written description of the victim, detailing her height, the colour of her eyes, the size of the boots and gloves she wore. It was a gem in its way that description. Nothing was omitted — complexion, teeth, eyebrows, ears, size of mouth, everything was set down in terse, forceful English.

Next came the portraits found in her rooms —none of them remarkable, yet all were of value; and, lastly, the Japanese spaniel, now quite recovered from its wounds, a playful, pretty pet, fond of being coddled by any one who would pet it.

Loder jotted down his impressions, and then read his notes carefully, after which he tore them up and tossed them into the sea. His notes ran:

"Motives — certainly not robbery, for the woman's jewellery and a fair sum in cash in the house was not touched. It was not the outcome of a quarrel, for the victim was lying on a couch smoking cigarettes when attacked, as the half-smoked end of a cigarette was in the fold of her bodice, and it had burnt a

small hole in the lace before it went out. There were a dozen cigarette-ends in an ash-tray beside the couch, and they were of the same make as the one half smoked. It was not the Jap who killed her, for the Jap was a small man, and had slender hands with short fingers, as his gloves proved, and the marks on the model could only be covered by a man with a hand like a saddle-flap. The motive might have been revenge, or it might have been political. If the Jap did not murder the woman, what had become of the Jap?

"I feel like a school-boy with a ball of knotted string; I can't find any ends to catch hold of. But I've got the string, and the end may turn up in Tokio; and it strikes me that I shall find a little, brown man at one end of my string and a big, white man at the other."

Loder spent three months in Tokio and learnt nothing. Then he went on to Pekin and engaged the best Chinese detective he could get hold of, and laid his facts before him, and for nearly a year the pair worked unceasingly, but without avail. Then one day Yun Heo came to him and laid two photographs on the table. One was his own portrait of the dead woman of the Red Farm, the other was a portrait of the same woman

dressed in richest furs. The latter bore the name of a photographer in Port Arthur.

An hour later the two men were *en route* for what was then the greatest Russian stronghold in the Far East. A little money well spent and a few questions adroitly put to the photographer told them who the woman was. Her name does not matter. She had been a noted Polish singer, and had lived in Port Arthur for a long time — two years perhaps.

"Had she any lovers?"

The photographer threw out his hands. "What a question for Monsieur to ask — that kind of woman always had lovers."

"Any lovers in particular?"

A little more gold changed hands, and the photographer looked at the portraits the detective had taken from the Red Farm. He picked out one.

"That is Captain Ignatiff Surranoff. He was the last, and, oh yes, he had seemed very much enamoured at the time."

Loder took the little Japanese spaniel under his arm and went the rounds of Port Arthur for a walk. One night in a café the spaniel sprang from his lap and ran barking at the heels of a big man in an officer's uniform, who had just brushed past. The man turned with a curse and kicked wickedly

at the dog, but the creature seemed to be on the alert for just such a reception, and dodged under a table. The man's face was livid.

Loder knew the officer for the original of the photo in his pocket. He spoke hurriedly to the Chinese detective.

"Go and calm the dog and speak rudely to the man. I will pay well."

Yun Heo rose and did as he was bidden. In a burst of fury the Russian caught the Chinaman by the throat with his left hand, and held him until he sank limply to the floor; then he strode out of the café with the spaniel yapping at his heels. In his own room Loder measured the marks on the Chinaman's throat, and smiled. Yun Heo made a grimace that was very eloquent. Then Loder compared the measurements he had taken with the marks on the clay-model he had brought from Australia, and again he smiled. A week later Loder had proof that the Russian officer was absent from duty on leave at the time the murder was committed in the Red Farm.

Then he went to the military commander of the port and laid his evidence before him. The next day he called again. The commander met him with a grave face.

"You want to take that man back to Australia with you?" he said.

"Yes," answered Loder; "justice wants him in Australia for murder."

"Justice wanted him in Port Arthur for treason," was the quiet reply, "and justice has him. He was shot this morning. You can see his body if you like."

"Why was he shot?"

"He was suspected of having sold plans of our defences to the Japanese, using his mistress as a go-between. She betrayed us, then betrayed him by clearing out to Australia with the proceeds of his treachery; he followed her and killed her. He confessed it all when I arrested him and laid your murder proofs before him."

"But what became of the Japanese man-servant?" cried Loder.

"There was no Japanese man-servant. It was a Jap woman in disguise. She is probably in her own country at this moment. Whilst you were looking for a man, she, doubtless, walked away under your nose as a woman. I am grateful to you, sir, for having put a traitor into my hands; had I handed him over to you he might have escaped, and—he knew too much for me to run the risk. Have a glass of champagne, sir; your work is done, and well done."

X

HASSAN, THE NUBIAN

X

HASSAN, THE NUBIAN

A PARTY of prospectors, equipped by a big London mining firm, were camped in the Egyptian desert.

They had had the usual run of vicissitudes that come to treasure-seekers, and yet they were in no way down-hearted. Men of their type take a great deal of knocking about before they are beaten, for your real gold-seeker loves danger for danger's sake. The man who does not soon ceases to be a pioneer.

This party had quitted Port Soudan in an Arab *dhow*, which had been picked up by a sudden gale and dashed upon the coast. The men had lost pretty nearly all their worldly goods in the wreck; but no lives had paid forfeit to fortune, and they were satisfied.

They looked a picturesque group as they crouched near the small fire that the Arab servants had made for them. They were all dressed in their pyjamas, for the gale had

sprung up in the night, and had left them scant time to think of the niceties of the toilet. Most of them had buckled their revolver and cartridge-belts around them, and that was about all they had time to do.

The party consisted of seven Englishmen and five Arabs. Three other Arabs had been despatched in search of help. An English mining party can always get help in the East, because the people know that they will be well paid for any service they may render. The wind came whispering across the desert, not a boisterous wind, but chill enough to set the teeth of the adventurers chattering. The Arabs knew the night breeze well. They had a saying concerning it, which runs: "The soft night air will not lift the sand; but it will lay a man down."

There was one young fellow in the English ranks, little more than a boy, a clean-cut, hardy youngster, with high courage written all over him. He crouched as close as he could get to the little fire, and said nothing in the way of complaint, for he was one who knew how to take the gall with the honey, but his teeth were clipping together until they rattled, and his hands were shaking violently.

An old Arab with a grave face and deep-set, sombre eyes was watching him. He spoke at last to the leader of the expedition. "The

chill from the desert has got into the young man's bones. If he is not attended to now, he will be food for vultures in a few hours."

"What can be done?" was the answer. "We have no tents, no clothes, no shelter."

The Arab rose from his squatting position, and began to scoop a shallow hole in the sand. This did not take long to do.

"Lay the young man in this hole," commanded the Arab, and the Englishman obeyed promptly, and in silence.

The Arab covered the youth over with sand, and pressed it firm with his feet, leaving nothing exposed but the face, and still the teeth chattered incessantly. Taking a few handfuls of dried camel-dung, the Arab lit a small fire on the sand over the youth's chest, and another at his feet. Then he pushed the mouthpiece of his hookah between the twitching lips of the sick lad. "Smoke!" he commanded tersely. "Fill your lungs with smoke, or to-morrow you will go the long journey."

The youngster obeyed mechanically, and as the warmth from the fires ate its way down through the sand into his flesh, a pleasant drowsiness came over him, and he slept; and as he slumbered perspiration came out upon his forehead like dew. The ancient son of the desert noted it, and smiled.

"You think he will win through all right?" demanded the leader, who had noted the smile.

"Allah has him in his keeping," was the grave reply. "He will be very weak when he awakes, but a good meal and a sunbath will make him as if the things of this night had never been, for he is young, the blood in his veins is warm, and the marrow in his bones is untouched by disease or by wild living."

As the words left his lips there came a sound on the night air, the queer, uncanny swish swish of camels moving swiftly on sand.

It was a relief party coming from a neighbouring village. There was little noise to disturb the sleeper, for the real Arabs are a silent folk, who loathe noise of any kind. The camels were drawn round the camp-fire in a circle; a jerk upon a nose-line brought each beast to its knees. Tents, clothes, and food were unpacked, and an air of comfort soon pervaded the spot. Dry clothes first, then food and steaming coffee, then tobacco; and the gold-seekers were filled with content as they sprawled by the big camp-fire that had taken the place of the small heap of embers.

Amongst the newcomers was a man of

immense physique, a Nubian, so black that his oiled face looked like ebon velvet. He would have seemed a big man in any company of men, and yet, his head was so immense that it looked too large for his body. There was not a hair upon his face—lips, cheeks, and chin were bare, and his craggy brows overhung a pair of eyes that, though sunk far back in his head, were wonderfully luminous. It was a magnetic face, a face that spoke for power, for overmastering will, for indomitable purpose, courage, and intellectual resource.

He was a master of tongues, for he spoke to the black servants in their own dialect, to the Arabs in Arabic, and to the English in the language of the land of their nativity, and he spoke to all in the tones of one who is used to the deference of his fellow-men. A strange personage to find at the head of a small relief party on the fringe of the Egytian desert.

The Arabs and the natives called him a magician, a seer, a reader of the past and the future, a being who could draw the curtain away from a soul and leave it naked. The white tourists who came to the land of the Pharaohs to carve their initials upon the pyramids, and make the stillness of the Nile nights hideous with music-hall ballads, called him out of the shallowness of their philosophy "a fakir and a trickster."

He had been a power in the land for many a long year, this Nubian. Men who made war came to him to predict results. Matrons who were childless came to him to buy charms.

Whilst the prospectors sat smoking round the bivouac fire, the Nubian sat cross-legged and said no word. He did not even listen, but gazed across the smoke that rose from the burning dung with wide-open eyes, and the Arabs watched him, wondering as they watched.

"Hush!" said one to another who was sharpening his knife on a stone. "Hush, the Nubian is reading the future fate of some man. It may be it is thine, fool, disturb him not," and the man reproved laid down his knife without a word.

After a time the Nubian drew a long, deep breath, and pressed the inside of his fingers against his eyes, as one does who has grown weary gazing too long upon the sun. Then he reached for his hookah and smoked in silence. None of the Arabs asked anything of him, but the Englishman who had charge of the expedition said, with just a shadow of a sarcastic smile playing under his moustache: "Is it permitted that a man ask a question?"

The Nubian gazed full at the speaker, and bowed his head gravely.

"You claim to be able to read men's fate?"

"I claim nothing."

"Are there any here whose future you know?"

A silence was upon the camp so intense that nothing reached the ear but the working of the camels' jaws as they chewed the cud in the starlight.

"There are two here whose destiny I know."

"Will you name the two and detail the destiny?"

The Nubian's great, strong face never moved a muscle. "You are one, and the sick lad in the sand is the other."

"What is my fate to be?"

The Nubian bent forward. "You ask me to lift the veil from the future?"

"If you can."

"You are a bold man, and you will die as you have lived, boldly, die with a weapon in your hand, before the Nile floods its banks again. I have seen the sands red with your blood. Your grave will lie in the desert. Your enterprise will fail, and all who march with you will feed the vultures—all excepting one."

The English leader's eyelids drew close together, until the eyes looked just like two tiny slits of blue steel flashing through the lashes, and he gazed back unflinchingly at the speaker.

"So that is to be my fate, is it?"

"That is your fate."

"And what is to be the fate of the lad who sleeps in the sand?"

The Nubian crouched further forward, his big nostrils, the nostrils of the fighting man, closing and expanding in his excitement. "The young lad belongs to the desert, though he was born in other lands. The desert cradles him to-night, it will be his cradle always, never his grave. He will live to be rich and great, he shall sit at the councils of the mighty, and men who move armies shall hang upon his words as upon the words of an oracle. Neither fire nor steel, pestilence nor famine shall touch him. The desert will be a mantle of death to you, a mantle of fortune to him."

The Arabs gazed pitifully at the Englishman, for to them he was as one who stood within the very shadow of death. He reached out his hand and touched the Nubian on the knee, and his hand was firm and cool.

"Give me some sign that you speak the truth."

The Nubian answered: "The blind always seek for a sign, yet I will give it you because your heart is stout. Put your hand in under the sand, draw from the young man's waist the belt that he wears. Three cartridges shall

be found missing from the right-hand side, near the buckle, and two chambers of his revolver shall be found empty, the rest are full."

Slowly and carefully, so as not to rouse the sleeper, the leader slipped his arm in under the sand and undid the buckle of the belt and drew it forth. The three cartridges were missing from the right-hand side of the buckle, two chambers of the revolver were empty, the rest were full.

"What do you make of it?" demanded one of the gold-seekers of his leader. "The Nubian couldn't have seen the belt or the gun, for the boy swam ashore in the dark, and was a foot under the sand, before the black came to our camp. It gives me the creeps along the spine."

"Does it, my lad? Well, if he has spoken the truth, you and I are going to get something worse than the creeps in our spines before old Nile brings the mud down again."

"Do you believe it, Cap?"

"I believe in destiny, whether this man is its mouthpiece or not. A few months will tell."

He knocked the cold ashes from his pipe, and, stretching his long limbs out by the fire, pillowed his head on his arm and slept like a child.

The Nubian, who had been watching him

with unwinking eyes, touched an Arab on the shoulder.

"See," he said, "that Englishman believes, yet he sleeps. That is why they overrun the world."

. . . .

Four months have passed away. Far out in the desert a little band of desperate men are battling for dear life against impossible odds. It is the same party we saw shipwrecked on the desert's coastal fringe. They have made a breast-work of kneeling camels, knee-halting the animals and tethering them head to tail. Arabs and Englishmen have fought well, side by side, hour after hour. They hold their ground against the unkempt, wild-haired horde that has risen like locusts in their track, but now the ammunition has run out, and they are waiting for the rush they know must soon come, the rush and the wild hand-to-hand fight, the swift stabbing of spears, and then the long—long sleep.

The leader of the party puts his hand lovingly and pitifully on the lean shoulder of the lad who is standing by his side, holding an empty Winchester clubbed ready for action. He has used that Winchester with deadly effect during the fight, and the light of battle is still in his eyes, the flush of anger still upon his boyish cheeks.

An Arab touches the English leader with a long, brown finger. "What is it, Ben Ali?"

"We have one fast camel; one can escape and carry the news. My tribe will avenge me, your people will avenge you. These dogs," he pointed scornfully towards the mob of wild creatures in the distance, "these dogs must not go unpaid."

"A glad light jumped into the Englishman's eyes. "Good, Ben Ali, bring the fast riding-camel here."

The Arab went swiftly to his task.

"Who goes?" asked the lad wonderingly.

"You do."

"I'm d—d if I do! I stay to see it out with the rest."

"You obey orders. Take the news to Ben Ali's tribe, then make your way to London and give these plans and this letter to my chief. They are the plans and map of the biggest thing found in Egypt since the days of the Pharaohs. Tell the chief that I rely upon him not to let my widow starve. Now, off with you; the Fuzzies are coming."

He picked up the lad by the scruff of the neck and the seat of the trousers, and tossed him on to the camel. Ben Ali cried out shrilly to the beast in Arabic, and it sped away like a bullet from a barrel.

Then came the thud of many naked feet,

wild yells from many throats, a cloud of desert dust, a clash of many spears, a bold leonine cheer from behind the camel rampart, a few moments of hacking and hewing, and then the barbarian horde looked down upon the little ring of dead, and the vultures flying high slanted their wings and drew steadily nearer and nearer.

XI

A SPORTING CHANCE

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It was a hot day, hot even for the north-west coast of West Australia, and it can be so hot there in midsummer that the tar will run from the deck seams on the pearling fleet like honey from an upturned comb.

It was running this day, and bubbling as it ran, as the *Dirk Hattrick* rose and fell lazily to the sleepy swell of the ocean. There was not air enough moving to have fluttered a cobweb on a thistle stalk. Even the seagulls seemed to bake in that blistering heat, as they hung heavily upon the wing, between the blue sky and the blue water.

The man at the wheel, a Kanaka, naked as Adam, except for a scanty loin-cloth of dirty calico, drowsed as he stood at his post. A Kanaka is always very much awake, or very much asleep; he never "thinks"—he has nothing to think with. He dreams or he acts. In the waist of the craft four men

were squatting, gambling; three Chinamen and an Englishman.

The Celestials were all big, gaunt men, with hard, grim faces. Dolts who know nothing of Chinamen, love to write and speak of them as a race who possess little or no physical courage, but men who have foregathered with them know better. The Englishman was of a type common to the Antipodes—a man sent from home by his own people because of his inherent lawlessness; a remittance man, paid by his relations so much per annum to give the white cliffs of Dover a wide berth. Little those at home cared where he went, how he lived, or how soon he died, providing he lived and died away from all who knew his antecedents, under an assumed name. You meet those men in all the unmapped corners of the earth; as a rule, they are hard drinkers when they can get liquor. Nine out of every dozen are gamblers, and will play for their boots when they have lost all else. Seven out of every twelve will fight like wild cats when there is any fighting to be done. About four in a thousand will work steadily for a livelihood. They will gibe with venom-tipped tongues at the country that bred them, and rail night or day at all her institutions, and promptly drive a fist

into the mouth of the foreigner who dares to do the same.

This man was one of that type. He had drifted on to the north-west coast, coming from no man knew where. Tropic suns had burnt his fair skin saddle brown; rough usage had made his hands horny and hard. A livid scar ran from his hair to his right eyebrow, and one ear was missing. Once an inquisitive newspaper man, travelling on the coast in search of local colour for a series of articles, had asked him what had become of that ear, and he had replied in his cold, sneering fashion that "he had lost it at a prayer meeting"; but the look that accompanied the words sent the scribe out of the drinking shanty with cold sweat trickling down his spine.

It was considered a serious breach of etiquette in those days, out there on the fringe of the world, where the dregs of the East and the West met, to ask a man how he lost a limb or came by a scar, unless, of course, you were looking for a little recreation in the shape of a rough-and-tumble fight. If you happened to have yearnings that way, you were a glutton if your yearnings were not soon satisfied.

This Englishman was not of the wilfully provocative order of biped, but no man ever

saw him turn his back upon a quarrel; and when he did fight he fought with the cold ferocity that never spares. In size and make he would have passed for a twin brother to John Burns; broad in the shoulder, narrow in the flank, deep of chest, quick as a flash in his movements; a bad man to fasten a quarrel on at any time.

He had made a name for himself during the few months he hung about on the coast. The wildest of the whites—and they were among the wildest blades on earth—soon learnt to let him alone. Runaway sailors, disgraced captains and officers of ships, escaped convicts from Noumea and other penal settlements, rankers, desperate gamblers from the Pacific slope, outcasts and outlaws from China and Japan, learnt to know and respect him by the only law that appealed to them—the law of the heavy hand and unblenching courage.

Then a letter came to him bearing the post-mark "Manchester, England," and he, who had been well-nigh penniless, became possessed of funds, and the coast knew him for what he was—"a remittance man." With the money that letter contained he went into partnership with three Chinamen who owned a pearling lugger, and on this blazing hot day when he comes into our story the lugger was returning from the first trip to the oyster beds,

having had as successful a season as any boat in the fleet. The crew of the *Dirk Hattrick* consisted of the Englishman, the three Chinamen, a Kanaka, four cut-throat-looking Malays, and an American negro.

The four men were not gambling for money. They had put aside enough pearls to pay the wages of the crew, and the wear and tear of the boat, and had divided the rest into four equal parts. Then the Englishman had proposed that they should kill the time on the home run with a little quiet gamble. On the instant the Chinaman had produced a pack of cards, and each man sat or squatted on deck with his pearls in a small basin beside him. Coolly and calmly the Englishman had shuffled the cards, examining them intently; then, with a quiet smile, he had tossed them over the side.

"Wha' for?" demanded one of the Celestials.

"I want a sporting chance. Those cards were marked, every one of 'em."

The Chinaman pushed his half-drawn knife back into his belt. "Welley good," he said, with a slow smile. "You show cards."

The Englishman produced a pack and tossed it down carelessly. The Chinamen all scrutinised the pasteboards carefully, and one by one tore them across, and laid the *débris* in a little pile.

"Smell a rat—eh?" asked the Englishman.

"Welley muchee rats; all marked," was the bland response. "P'laps you got dice-box."

The Englishman had not, but the negro cook had, and two sets of dice. In one set a loaded die was found, and in the other a die that had been so artfully filed that the ace turned up every time it was turned out of the box in a certain manner. Poker dice is a fascinating game to play when the stakes happen to be heavy, but it is not profitable when the dice are either filed or loaded, unless you happen to be the man who knows of the manipulation of the bones.

At last the prospective gamblers were satisfied that all had a fair sporting chance, and the game began. For two hours the Englishman lost steadily, and the pearls in his china bowl were dwindling rapidly. Suddenly he reached out and caught Lung Ho by the wrist, and gave a wrench that would have cracked the bone in a weaker arm. Lung Ho was holding the dice-box at the time, and was just about to throw. As the Englishman twisted the yellow wrist one of the dice was seen to lie in the hollow of his palm, kept there by his cunningly bent thumb. He had palmed it, and had slid a loaded die into the box. A nasty glitter came into the Englishman's eyes.

"You are cheating, you yellow dog!" he growled.

"No cheat; me a Clistian."

"A nice Christian. How did one of those dice get into your palm?"

A look of ineffable wonder grew on the pagan's face. "Allee same accident; mus' a slipp' down my sleeve."

The Englishman reached out his hand again, and this time he took hold of the basin that held Lung Ho's pearls.

"Wha' for?" shrilled the Celestial.

"I'll mind 'em; they might slip up your sleeve," was the laconic answer.

The next moment a yellow fury, knife in hand, was on top of the Englishman; but the negro cook kicked the pagan on the side of the head and allowed the Englishman to rise. Forty seconds later the white man and the black were battling for dear life against the whole of the brown and yellow crew. They fought well, but the odds were too heavy, for the Kanaka and the Malays joined forces with the Chinamen. A knife-thrust supplemented by a smashing blow on the head with a piece of lead piping, had strewn the negro out very limp. As for the Englishman, he was a sight to be remembered. His face had a gash in it from which the blood flowed down on to his cheek, and

there were many ugly bruises caused by kicking feet. Yet, when they propped him up with his hands bound behind him, he displayed no sign of fear. His eyes fell upon the form of a Kanaka lying very still, with his forehead pillowed on his arm.

"Got that one, anyhow," he snarled.

"Gotee two more," put in Wing Fut calmly. "Lookee at Lung Ho."

The Englishman looked and saw Lung squatting down a couple of yards away. The Chinaman coughed in a peculiar fashion every now and again, and a little froth and blood came to his lips each time his chest heaved. A tyro might not have thought much of that cough, but it was very eloquent to a man who had seen a knife used in brawls as often as the Englishman had.

"Yes," he said, "I think I've got friend Lung also; he won't have any more accidents with dice."

Lung Ho heard this pleasantry, and smiled a sickly, ghastly, almost *post-mortem* kind of smile, for Lung, though a cheat, was game to the marrow.

The other man who had been annexed was a Malay—the negro had accounted for him—and to judge from the way in which he lay curled up, his account was permanently settled and receipted.

Lung Ho's pearls were reverently put away, to be sent to his relatives in Tientsin. The negro's wages and the Englishman's pearls were divided amongst the survivors. Then Wing Fut, with no trace of anger in his soft voice, said to the Englishman: "You Clistian, you better play now."

"I don't think praying will do me much good, Wing. What are you going to do with me and the nigger?"

Wing touched the hilt of his knife in a casual way, and smiled again. "Velly qulick way," he remarked philosophically. "P'laps," he added, as an after-thought, "p'laps it hurtee lill bit at first."

"Look here, Wing," came the quiet response, "why not give us a sporting chance; the whole thing has been a gamble, you know."

Wing nodded pleasantly. The world might own a greater gambler than he, but it is doubtful. "Plenty big gamble this time, eh? You lose, no come out top sides, eh?"

Wing spoke as if a human life was of no more account than an oyster shell in his eyes. Maybe it was not; lots of Asiatics are built that way.

"That's so, Wing," responded the Englishman; "the nigger and I have got the loser's end of the purse—come out 'bottom sides,'

as you yellow pagans say—so why not let the knife alone now and give us a sporting chance?"

"No savee."

"Well, untie our hands, and pitch us over the side; we can swim till we drown."

Wing turned his oval eyes on the slowly heaving sea; no land anywhere in sight, no ship, nothing but water as far as human eyes could reach. "You likee it that way?" he asked.

"Can't say I like it that way," was the reckless response, "but I'd rather swim and swim until I drown, than be stuck in cold blood like a calf; it's a sort of fight to a finish, you know."

Wing beckoned his friends and had a word with them, and then he cut the nigger's bonds and heaved him over the side like a log. He began to swim as soon as he struck the water.

"Goo'-bye," said Wing cheerily, as he sent the Englishman to join the black. Leaning lazily over the stern the brown-and-yellow men watched the black man and the white swimming for life, and made bets as to which would give up and sink first. Both were splendid swimmers; hour after hour they swam on, every now and again turning upon their backs to float, until the blistering sun made them turn face downwards once more.

As the lugger drifted out of sight the sporting instinct woke in Wing's pagan soul; he picked up a small plank. "That carry one," he soliloquised, and dropped it, unseen by his friends, into the sea, and went forward to have his chow.

Swimming like a pair of otters the two castaways came suddenly abreast of that small plank, and each grabbed it. But under their combined weight it dipped and went under.

"Only carry one, boss," gasped the black.

He was nearly beaten, for in spite of herculean strength, and amazing hardihood, his wound was telling upon him,

For a moment the Englishman wrestled with temptation; then he remembered that the nigger had risked his life to help in the fight.

"Get up," he muttered, and, steadying the plank, he helped the black out of the water. Then he said: "You've got a sporting chance; a lugger may pick you up." And he swam away in the darkness to his fate.

XII

THE HAUNTED MAN

XII

THE HAUNTED MAN

THE packed court was hushed. The jurymen, leaning forward in their places with strained, eager faces, listened with rapt attention to the silver-tongued orator who was pleading with almost matchless eloquence for a man's life.

He did not merely talk, this man who fronted the jury in that stifling court-house. He was an actor, if ever one lived, as much an actor as Bernhardt or Irving at the height of their fame; the court-house was the theatre he loved, a jury the audience his soul yearned for.

He never did things as other advocates did; his line of defence was always original, always powerful, seldom abortive. He knew a jury the moment his eyes fell upon them, knew what method he would have to adopt to win them. He could be coldly analytical, dignified, dramatic to the verge of melodrama. He could woo with soft words, and soften

hearts that seemed as hard as grey granite. He could be pitiful, tender, scornful, a mocking, gibing, jeering devil. When it suited him to do so he could take the chain of evidence and undo it patiently, link by link, until it lay before the eyes of jurors a heaped-up mass of odds and ends unworthy of a sane man's consideration. At other times he would throw analysis to the dogs and depend upon his personal magnetism, upon the marvellous witchery of his silvery voice.

He would appeal to the elementary passions of the jury, and, lifting them off their balance by his rhetoric, sweep them away upon a whirlwind of words—words that stirred the blood and set the pulses beating, words that rang like the stroke of steel spurs on marble, words that could cut like a whip-lash on a winter's day, words that spared neither the living nor the dead, age or sex.

He had won more important criminal cases than any man who had ever practised in California, and had lifted many men from the very shadow of death, and set them free.

Apart from his profession he was nothing—merely nothing. Politics, sport, society, money-making—none of these things had allurements for him. He was simply Lefroy, the criminal advocate — the greatest actor-orator in the pulsing drama of crime.

Had he turned his attention to politics he might have become President, for there was that about him which magnetised men. Folks called him Lefroy the "spell-binder," but nothing could tempt him away from his profession.

When not engaged on either side, which was rare, he would go to the court and watch a great case, just as habitual theatre-goers watch a drama. He would sit with his eyes half-closed, coldly impassive, and listen to the attack and defence. Such things made up his life.

He had no wife, he made no friends. People who professed to know something of his antecedents said that he had arrived in California when a mere boy with an elder sister who had been a mother to him, until she married a mining adventurer and went with him into the wilds of Arizona to share his fortunes and vicissitudes.

He had been bitterly opposed to that marriage, considering in his hot, youthful way that the man was not good enough for the loving, patient, womanly sister who had filled his mother's place ever since the grave closed over her.

He was wrong. The man his sister married was worthy of any woman; for though rough in appearance and rugged in speech he was

a straight man in all his dealings. Lefroy was to learn in later life that when you get a straight mining man you get the squarest kind of human being that breathes, though straight mining men are rare.

Bitter words passed between the lad and his sister, and between that sister's husband and himself. The wedded pair went away into the wilderness, and one child, a girl, was born to them.

Then calamity fell heavily and suddenly upon the little family. The mining camp in which they had taken up their abode was raided by Indians, who had broken from the reservation, and both the mother and the father were killed. The child escaped, and was adopted by a childless couple of pioneers, and for many years she remained with them as their child; but at last she left them, to make her way into the big towns and cities of the West, for her blood was calling her and she had to go. It was the blood of a breed of actors and actresses, and the strain was rich in her.

She was like her mother's brother, the great advocate—the drama was part of her nature, just as sea spume is part of the ocean.

The actress knew that the advocate was her uncle. He did not know the actress was his niece, because she had used the name of

her adopted parents when she went on the stage, and never made herself known to the man who in his hot youth had flouted her father and upbraided her mother.

Now she lay dead, killed in a fit of insane jealousy by the prisoner in the dock, a young cattle-ranch owner, who had been bewitched by her genius and her beauty.

The woman-slayer had engaged Lefroy to defend him, not knowing that the advocate was the only blood relation the dead woman had in the State.

Lefroy had accepted the task, being unaware that the dead actress was his much-loved sister's child; but during the conduct of the case the knowledge had come to Lefroy.

At first it stunned him. The marvel of the thing, the irony of it, that he should have been selected to save the life of the man who had done his kinswoman to death. At first he felt his gorge rise against the prisoner, and he determined then and there to throw up his brief, and let some lesser man defend the woman-slayer.

But the situation grew upon him, the intense dramatic force of all the surroundings touched the dominant note in his nature. Just as *The Bells* appealed to Henry Irving, so this living thing appealed to him. He would be true to his profession, true to his client, though

that client's hands were red and dripping with his kinswoman's blood.

He had always believed that if a great occasion arose, he could rise above the common tide of human feeling, and stand a thing apart from his fellows. The occasion had come. He determined to rise with the tide and sink his individuality.

When he stood up to plead for the prisoner his clean-shaven face was pallid, his eyes blood-shot, his lips tremulous, his voice low and intense.

His colleagues expected him to point the finger of scorn at the name of the dead woman. They thought that his only hope of saving his client from the electric chair lay in smirching the fair fame of the victim.

They whispered amongst themselves that he would be compelled to make her seem a woman who had trodden with careless feet along the primrose paths of love and dalliance, in order to awaken sympathy for the man who stood with clenched hands and square jaws in the dock.

"Lefroy has done many wonderful things with juries," whispered a greybeard, who was himself great in the law; "but," he added, "this is the hardest case he has ever had. The evidence is clear against his client; I can see a loophole nowhere."

The jury was hanging on the advocate's words. Now and again one of them turned to gaze at the prisoner, just a fleeting gaze, and each time this happened Lefroy seemed to concentrate all his forces of mind and will upon the jury, until he drew the eyes to himself, drew them and held them, until every man was craning forward to catch his utterances.

He did not cast one stone at the dead; instead of that, he took the jury away from the crowded, stifling court-house, where they could hear the hum of a city's traffic, and the murmur of the great Pacific beating on the beach; took them on the wings of fancy, by virtue of the orator's gift that was in him, to that wild Arizona camp, and made them hear the yells of the redskins as they brandished scalping-knife and tomahawk, made them hear the whip-like crack of the pioneer's rifle, and above it all the wailing of a baby voice.

He made them follow that baby girl step by step from childhood to girlhood, from girlhood to womanhood, and all along the highway of her life he scattered flowers of praise. He took them on to the stage with her, and made them see her splendid triumphs; he took them behind the scenes, and laid bare the temptations that had been set to snare

her feet, and he crowned her queen of chastity and purity, a genius lifting herself from the sloughs of poverty to her own place amongst the great, unaided, and unsoiled.

Men clenched their teeth as they listened, and eyes that were hard as steel in the battle of life grew humid with hard-held tears.

Lefroy himself was like a being transfigured. His beautiful voice rose and fell, now pulsating with admiration, now quivering with unspeakable pain as he crowned the dead with flowers.

Then came a dramatic pause, a stillness in which men felt their own heart-beats, as Lefroy faced round and looked at the prisoner.

He was leaning on the rail, his hands locked together as though the knuckles would burst through flesh and skin; his underjaw protruding, his eyes fixed on the advocate in a wild, almost maniac stare, the sweat trickling in great beads down his face. He knew now who his advocate was, knew that this must be the man the dead actress had spoken of so often, as the pitiless relative who was too proud to own her.

A babble of incoherent words burst in a furious torrent from his lips, for he thought that his advocate had thrown him over, and many in that packed court-room besides the prisoner thought so also, for the eulogy on

the murdered woman had been wonderfully complete and powerful.

No one who looked at the prisoner as he leaned forward from the dock, babbling in impotent wrath at his advocate, could have believed that he was acting a part. The whites of his eyes were blood-shot, a little trickle of foam escaped from the corners of his mouth. Lefroy had studied his temperament, and had wound him up to the maniac point. No actor that ever lived could have played the madman's part as that man in the dock played it, for he was mad for the time being. Mad to think that he had baited the trap that appeared to lead him to death.

Long and pitifully Lefroy gazed at the mouthing wretch. The advocate was acting then, acting with all the consummate art of which he was a master, and the magnetised jury saw the prisoner through the advocate's eyes rather than through their own.

When he turned to the jury he touched their pity with deft fingers, playing with their heart-strings. He spoke of brain-storms that swept a man's reason from its balance as cyclones sweep the Pacific, leaving desolation and ruin in their wake.

He asked what reason this man who jibbered upon them from the dock had for the crime. The woman was pure, the man had loved her,

and she had loved him; but she loved art, dramatic art, better than she loved her lover; she would not leave the stage and forego her triumphs. Then came the brain-storm, and the tragedy—born of momentary madness, which brings us face to face with the present—and what a present!—a dead woman mourned by a nation— and that——

With towering figure and outstretched hand, Lefroy pointed to the assassin, who, frantic with rage, struggled to leap from the dock to attack him, and was only held back by two burly warders.

When the jury left the court that had recorded a verdict of "Temporarily Insane," the prisoner went into durance.

The advocate went home. Men thought of his triumph, and wondered. He thought of the dead woman, and said nothing.

. . . .

Fifteen months passed, and the insanity experts of the prison declared the prisoner sane again. He was sane enough to sign large cheques, and he was free. He had even learned to solace himself with the thought that he was not a murderer; he was the victim of a brain-storm.

As he stepped into a *coupé* at the prison gates, Lefroy, who had been waiting, stepped in beside him, but did not speak a word.

After a while the ex-prisoner, unable to bear the strain of that silent presence, sprang out of the *coupé*.

Lefroy did the same, and followed him. He never spoke, never gave him a peg to hang a quarrel upon. He slept at the same hotels, dined at the same table, travelled in the same cars. He was getting on his enemy's nerves with a grim persistency that proved his knowledge of human nature. The haunted man fled to Los Angeles. Lefroy went with him like a shadow, never uttering a word, but his eyes—those all-compelling eyes that had magnetised the jury — seemed eternally on the face of the woman-slayer.

When he looked up from his plate at meals he met those eyes, so strangely like the eyes of the actress he had done to death. When he fled to his room at night the last thing he saw was the silent, accusing face in the corridor. When he came down in the morning that face was always waiting for him, either on the stairs or on the landing.

Lefroy was driving him desperate. He bolted back to San Francisco. Lefroy chartered a special train, and was waiting for him on the platform when he arrived.

He caught sight of the pale, clean-shaven face, and half-turned as if to flee. Then he had another "brain-storm," the last he ever

had; his hand went to his hip-pocket for his pistol; but Lefroy had not studied his man for nothing.

The two pistols spoke at once; but one was fired by a frightened, goaded man, the other by a human icicle.

"Good job you were quick on the trigger, Mr Lefroy," said a railway detective, who had seen (as he thought) the whole episode. "The beggar was as rabid as a mad dog. Close thing for you; his bullet took away the flower from your buttonhole, but you got him good and sure. He's down and out!"

Then Lefroy went and put a wreath on the grave of his sister's child.

XIII

FROM THE BURIED PAST

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FROM THE BURIED PAST

Like most of the fishing villages on the French coast La Guippire was very old, and most of its inhabitants could trace their descent from father to son, through many generations of fisher-folk, who had lived and died peacefully enough within its precincts.

It is true, that long ago in the days when smuggling was a profitable occupation, some of the men of La Guippire had ventured to run illicit cargoes to the English coast; but those days were dead, and one only heard of such things from the lips of old gossips, who would prate of those adventurous times over a cup of wine, on such rare occasions as the advent of a stranger within the gates of La Guippire.

Nothing had ever happened to materially alter the course of events in this little old-world, out-of-the-way corner of creation. Even the great revolution that had stirred the pulse of humanity in nearly every land

had failed to stir the calm of these fisher-folk, who lived—year in year out—a hard, laborious existence, forcing the surly ocean to yield a hand-to-mouth livelihood to them, and to their wives and families.

Many years after the death of the great Napoleon in exile, an English fishing-smack landed a party of three at La Guippire. One was an old man with a thin, crabbed face, and the manner of an autocrat. He was gaunt and poverty - stricken, yet he spoke and acted like one who had ruled in high places. Long years of exile in England had not toned his arrogance, or lowered his pride. His fierce, old eyes flashed from under bony brows like the eyes of a hawk just unhooded, and at the least sign of irritation his high, thin nose would quiver like the nose of a hound about to spring. His clothes were nearly threadbare, yet they were of a cut and material that spoke dumbly of courts and courtly company. His hands were long and thin and shapely. No man who had ever toiled for a living could grow old, and yet show such hands as those.

Poor as a rat he might be, and yet there was that about him which made the fisher-folk shrink back and give him the wall, when they met him in the village.

His hair, which was white as snow, he wore

long, gathered at the back in a queue, and tied by a piece of faded black ribbon. Even his eyebrows were white and bristly, as though the frost from the island that had given him a refuge so long had touched them. The eyes beneath were coal-black and piercing.

He looked what he was, poor as a rat, proud as a prince, a fierce, vindictive, unbending, unrelenting old aristocrat. Of the two companions of this strange old man, one was a tiny tot of a girl, the other a boy of ten, who halted as he walked, for one leg was shorter than the other. The girl child looked the picture of health and beauty. The boy had a thin, weird kind of figure, and a pinched, starved face—only his eyes were magnetic. The two little creatures were the grandchildren of the white-haired old thoroughbred. He had brought them back with him to a land that had drunk the blood of nearly all their kinsfolk. He had seen his wife kneel at the guillotine, had seen the head he had fondled and caressed fall into the hateful basket. Perhaps that was why his old eyes were so terribly fierce, even yet. When age hardens hate, it is steel-edged and pitiless.

The English fishing-smack had put ashore a few trucks, and one big, iron-clasped chest, when the three wayfarers were landed. Then the rough sea-dogs had taken themselves off

without satisfying the curiosity of the knot of fisher-folk who had questioned them.

There was a good reason why they had said nothing about their passengers — they had nothing to say. Curtly the old exile had asked the way to the *curé's* house, and curtly he had thanked his informant. Then, leaving his belongings on the beach, he had taken the girl in his arms and marched off, the lame boy limping painfully beside him.

What took place between the *curé* and the returned wanderer no man ever knew, but a few hours afterwards all the village learned that the people who had come to them from the lap of the sea had gone to live in the tumble-down remnant of a farmhouse that overlooked the bay.

It had been empty for many years that farmhouse, and people had wondered why no owner had come to look after it. They knew that it had formed part of the possessions of a family that people had said had died out long ago. Now the owner had come into his own, and the simple folk wondered more than they had ever done before.

As the days went by it became known that the wanderers had settled down permanently at La Guippire. As soon as the domestic arrangements were made, the white-haired man had unlocked the big iron-clasped chest,

and had taken from its inside two long, thin blades. One of these he had handed to the cripple boy, the other he took in his own shrivelled, claw-like hand, and had commenced to teach the child the use of the weapon. And the little fellow, who seemed to take but slight interest in any other thing in life, would fix those strange, magnetic eyes of his first on the cold, blue steel, then upon the black, blazing eyes of his grandsire.

It was an uncanny sight to watch those two with the steel between them; one on the threshold of life, one far gone towards the grave. When the child grew tired the grandsire would bid him be seated, and then, rolling back the sleeve from his skinny, right arm, he would fight with an imaginary enemy, bidding the child watch his every movement. At intervals he would pause and explain this or that movement to his pupil.

At one time it would be this way: "Now, little one, give all your attention!" He would make a few marvellously rapid thrusts, now high, now low, now inside, now outside the guard.

"So!" he would explain, "that is how St Just, who was one of the best blades in France, would attack, and his attack was fatal unless you knew and understood his method. Now watch whilst I show you the

method of the man who killed St Just—the Sieur de Morny."

He would crouch until his body was almost bent double; retreating, always retreating, with his sword-arm crooked until it was not more than half its length. Then suddenly, even as he retreated, he would leap nimbly to one side, straighten his body, and thrust down, as if going over a tall man's guard. "That was how he killed St Just. I saw him do it. It was a pretty sight, grandchild!"

And the boy would nod his head gravely and approvingly, as if he fully appreciated the subtlety of the manœuvre.

"Which style do you like best?" the old warlock would enquire, and the boy would answer gravely: "Both are good; different styles for different men you fight with. St Just's style for one enemy, De Morny's style for another. The thing is to make up your mind quickly which fashion to adopt when the man you have to fight is in front of you."

"Good—good!" the old man would cry; then he would take the boyish face in his hands and look at him long and earnestly. At such times he would cry: "I was the best swordsman of my day in France, but my father—your great grandfather—was the

best blade in all Europe. You have his eyes. You are lame, but with those eyes you will not mind lameness."

And the boy would nod again gravely and say: "No; I shall not mind lameness when the man I have to fight is in front of me."

After the lesson, which always lasted for hours every day, rain or shine, the old exile would sit in front of the boy and tell him the story round which his life was to revolve.

"It was my friend, Gaston Fauergnac, who betrayed our party; it was he who sold us to the butchers; it was he who gave the red Republican wolves the list of aristocrats remaining in France, with the description of their hiding-places; it was he—he—he——" The old man would rise with nose, mouth, and white eyebrows all working madly. "It was he who sent your grandmother, my beloved and honoured wife, to the guillotine. I was never able to meet him; he is dead. I may never meet his son, but if I do not, and if you do, you must make him fight, and kill him."

The boy, sitting very still in his favourite attitude, one knee nursed by his clasped hands, would nod and say: "Yes, yes, I shall kill him."

"If his son escapes you, and you meet his grandson, you will kill him."

"I will not leave one of the House of Fauergnac alive in France," the boy would answer.

The old man would press the blue steel to the youngster's lips. The boy would kiss it, and the day's lesson would end. That was his everyday lesson until his grandfather died, and he was eighteen years old.

The good *curé* had taught him as well as he was able all the other things that a lad of breeding should know, and so he had grown from childhood to young manhood in loneliness and poverty, with hate of the destroyer of his house instilled into him every day, aye, almost every hour of his life. He had but one dream, one ambition—to meet the representative of the House of Fauergnac and kill him.

His sister, growing up beside him, had even a more lonely life than the cripple boy, for she had nothing to live for—nothing to look forward to. She could not play with the fisher lasses, for her grandfather would have considered such a thing a degradation. Poor she might be, but in her veins ran the blood of the old nobility of France, the proudest blood in Europe.

When the old man's hour for passing had come, he had called the boy to his bedside and said: "You will not forget? Whenever

or wherever you meet a Fauergnac you will think of the day when the guillotine did its work on the Flower of France?"

And the boy, fixing those strange eyes of his on the eyes of the other had answered simply: "I will not forget."

Then the old man had turned his face to the wall and had died without further sign.

Then the *curé* came and told the young man that every year he would receive a small sum of money, just a pittance, that would enable him and his sister to live as they had always lived.

"Where does the money come from?" he had asked; but the *curé* refused to say.

"Your grandfather was content to receive the money year by year, so must you be content, and without question."

"Have I a right to it, or is it charity?"

"You have a right," was the *curé's* answer, and no more was said.

After the funeral the young man used to fence daily with his sister. She was very clever, very quick, and her education had been almost as complete as his own.

A year passed, and great changes were talked of for La Guippire. The little fishing village was to be turned into a French naval base. Officers in uniform came down and measured off spaces fronting the bay, artisans

came in flocks and began to erect buildings, engineers and surveyors were constantly at work.

The village was transformed. On the main sea-front an esplanade was created, cafés sprang up with magical swiftness, and amidst the turmoil and bustle of the new life the simple fisher-folk found themselves elbowed out of the way. They belonged to the past.

The lame young man in the shabby clothes who lived in the tumble-down farmhouse constantly limped down and walked silently amongst the new arrivals. He made no friends, but he was gravely courteous to all who addressed him, and his stiff, unbending manner caused much comment, especially amongst the military and naval officers, who saw in him something that awoke echoes of the past.

His sister sometimes went with him on his explorations—but not often. She was too beautiful and too shabby, too proud and too poor to care to go where others could notice her.

One day, however, a slight accident to the girl brought a man to the rescue, a big, burly man, who was the first military engineer of his day. He begged to be allowed to drive the brother and sister home, and the lame young man consented.

That was but the beginning. Many visits

followed, until, in the end, the engineer, who had no one to consult but himself, asked the girl to be his wife. She referred him to her brother as the head of the family, and the cripple freely and frankly gave his sanction.

The next evening the three dined together at the leading café, and the great engineer gaily introduced his *fiancé* to his friends.

It was getting late when two men entered the café arm-in-arm. They were dressed in the uniform of a regiment of artillery. One was a colonel, the other a lieutenant.

The moment the eyes of the cripple fell upon the face of the colonel his mouth began to twitch. He drew from an inner pocket a miniature painted on ivory, and studied it closely, raising his eyes every now and again to the face of the man opposite.

Folks smiled. They had seen him do that many times during the past few months, but they had never seen his face with such a look upon it as it wore now.

Turning to his sister's *fiancée*, who had been watching him with an amused smile, the cripple said: "Who are those two gentlemen?"

"Colonel and Lieutenant Fauergnac, of the Artillery. Shall I introduce you?"

"Please—yes."

The introduction was made, and the cripple

chatted for nearly an hour with his new friends. Then he limped over to his sister and whispered: "It has come at last. Those two men are the last of the House of Fauergnac. I have it from their own lips."

The girl grasped his hand. "You—you—will you do it?"

His voice was low and fierce. "Yes."

He borrowed his sister's *fiancé's* carriage, and drove home. Going to the iron-clasped chest he drew out an old-world suit of clothes, such clothes as the men of his family wore when Louis was King, and when he had dressed he took the two swords, his father's and his grandfather's, under his arm, and went again to the café.

As he entered the place he saw that every-one was sitting very much as when he left. He limped painfully and slowly amidst the little round tables, a quaint, old-world figure in that dress of a bygone day.

The people ceased drinking and talking, and looked at him wonderingly. No one laughed; his face was too solemn and too tense to arouse mirth.

Laying the swords on his sister's lap he limped over to the two Fauergnacs and said something in a low voice to the elder one. The man leant back in his chair and laughed noisily. The cripple slowly drew off one of

his old faded gloves and struck him across the mouth.

Out in the yellow moonlight, the elder Fauergnac, the one who had laughed noisily, was lying on the grass. His son, the lieutenant, was kneeling beside him, trying to staunch the blood that flowed in a pink stream down his chest. The cripple stood a few paces away, his sword bent in both hands, waiting.

The dying man whispered: "Don't—fight—with him, Louis. He is a demon. I know—the—history—of—his race."

"I will fight him, father."

"No, no, Louis, you are the—last—of our—race—he will kill you—you."

And he did.

XIV

A HUNTER OF LIONS AND A GIVER OF KISSES

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A HUNTER OF LIONS AND A GIVER OF KISSES

The farmhouse, built of unhewn rocks gathered by Kaffir slaves in the ravine below, perched like an uneasy bird on the precipitous slope of the kopje. There was little about the dwelling to single it out from thousands of others that lie scattered over Nature's dimpled breast in the interior of South Africa, it was long and low, and rude, without one solitary redeeming trait in the shape of architectural ornament. A strong, stout shelter for man and maid—nothing more.

Above it the kopje rose almost perpendicularly, until the frowning black rocks on its crest felt the soft caresses of the snow-white clouds that floated in the dazzling blue sky. Below, the kopje sloped into a ravine where a narrow streamlet, like a silver streak, bubbled and foamed amidst rocks and reeds, beyond the little watercourse a couple of hundred

yards of grass land lay, on which the scanty flocks and herds luxuriated in the rich veldt herbage. Then, just where the sunlight and the shadows met, another line of kopjes rose, making a framework for the little home, so ruggedly grand, so austerely great that the farmhouse lost its uncouthness and became a cradle for heroes, a nursery for freemen.

In that rude dwelling Paul Kotze had lived for five years. He had trekked there a single man, and found no living soul within three days' ride of the spot. His strong hands had erected the homestead stone by stone. His was the stout heart that had faced Nature's inhospitable welcome. He and his servants had built the stone fence round the little pasture ground. His hands had sown the seeds for the yearly crops of maize, and wheat, and oats. His judgment had selected the mares to breed from, so that his farm might become celebrated for the colts and fillies to be sold year by year. The sheep and the goats and cows came later, when he married the blue-eyed, fair-faced, white-souled Katrina Waal.

Paul was thirty when he married, and Katrina was only sixteen. He was strong and tall, browned and bearded, with just a suspicion of wildness in his past which made the old dames shake their heads; but the old

men said: "Let be with your chatter;" when the old women grew prophetic in their scandal-mongering, "Let be with your gossip, women."

Paul was a mighty hunter from his boyhood, and a good fighter when the Basutos tried to sweep the country, and if he was fond of a pretty face, small blame to the lad—all great hunters and fighters are; then the old greyheads chuckled in their beards, and told tales to one another concerning their own deeds in youth's hot days, wherein they figured largely as heroes in adventures of love, and hunting, and war. For no young man has yet met an old man who was not a bit of a rip and a bit of a hero in his sunny youth—if one is to believe the old men's tales.

Katrina had nothing to recommend her but her bonny face, she looked one square in the eyes (a rare gift with a woman) when she talked, and she knew a knave as a dog knows a tramp. Her figure was guiltless of corsets, yet, when she had given Paul their first and only son, it would have puzzled Worth, and all his Parisian staff, to have improved her figure. Her bust arched outwards below the shoulders, and inwards towards the waist, as a mother's should who wishes to give the world a race of strong men. She moved about her daily duties with a free, swinging stride, lithe, graceful, and extremely feminine, a fit

mate for one who had been both a mighty hunter and a lover of women. Passion was written in the full, rich, red lips, in the glance of the proud blue eyes, in the warm clasp of the strong shapely hands, in the carmine blood that swept so readily along neck and cheek; in the very spring of her strong, young body as she played with the child in the twilight, or held the bridle of the colt which Paul intended to back and break before selling. But it was the passion which belongs of right (the right of nature) to the wife, not the passion of the wanton.

The strong womanly chin, the bold, broad forehead, the slightly knitted brows, the fearlessness of her gaze were God's plainly written warnings to the libertine, to the devotee at the shrine of lust "to stand off the grass" where Katrina Kotze was concerned. Such a woman could snatch her husband's rifle from the wall and defend her honour, saving the last cartridge for herself, but she could never yield to any man's blandishments, no matter how strong the current of her blood might run; and believe me, there are many such women on God's green earth, more women than men, my masters.

Peace had settled upon that home, not the passionless peace of the mated dove, but rather the peace of the crested hawk, strong

in its love, and in the eternal fitness of mating.

Sometimes in between the seasons, when the time lay heavy on his hands, Paul longed for the crack of his rifle and the mad moments which intervene between the lifting of the loaded weapon to the steady shoulder, and the roar and spring of the wounded beast. He longed for those moments with all an old lion hunter's ceaseless craving; but he never longed for those other bygone joys: for the whispered word by the cactus hedge, for the stealthy clasp of a warm small hand; for the clinging touch of moist red lips hard pressed to his bearded mouth; and Katrina, she knew and understood. Had she been a man, she would have been as Paul had been in his youth, a hunter of lions and a giver of kisses. So when in his sleep he sometimes murmured the names of Johannah or Gussie, she only cuddled him closer, and kissed the names from his mouth as an angel might wipe some dark blot from the soul of a sinner.

When the war came, and the Briton measured his strength with the Boer, Kotze took his rifle from the wall, determined to live or die side by side with the men of his own blood. They might be right or they might be wrong, but right or wrong, Paul felt in

his soul that his place was with them, and it was Katrina who tightened his saddle girths when the nigger servant, Martinas, brought Paul's favourite horse to the door on the morning of farewell.

Her eyes were heavy with unshed tears, but her hand never trembled when she gripped the straps and laced the girths tight. Her hands never trembled when she lifted the little one up to kiss him farewell. But when he had gone, she locked herself up in her bedroom and had a good cry, as is the way with such women. But she ran the farm all the same, saw to the crops, to the mending of fences, to the milking and calving of cows; looked to the making of butter, the breeding of colts, and the making of bacon just as if Paul had been home; and the Kaffirs knew better than to try and loiter over their work. The "baas" was away at the war, but the "tante" had eyes and ears and hands for them both, and the lazy ones knew it.

One day Paul Kotze came back to see his loved ones. He was thinner, sterner, more self-contained than when he had left, for he had been amidst wild scenes of slaughter. He had seen comrades he had known from boyhood fall shattered by shot and shell, but undaunted in their pluck, dying for a lost cause, but dying as only brave men can die,

yielding up their lives to enrich the pages of history.

He made no vows to Katrina as he sat that one night, his last night by his own hearth, but she knew that when his country needed him Paul would not be found wanting, and she would not have had it otherwise, dearly as she loved him. Better it seemed to her that his little son should have no father, than that other children should point the finger of scorn at him and call him "a coward's son."

It was the morning after the home-coming, and Paul was smoking by his kitchen table, Katrina was making bread, and the little one was playing on the floor between them, when up the ravine came the clatter of horses' hoofs.

Paul sprang to his feet and gripped his rifle, Katrina threw up her head as a stag lifts his antlers at the first baying of the hounds. A Kaffir wench leapt breathlessly into the room. "The Rooibaatjes are coming, baas; they are almost here." She was breathless with running, for the British scouts had come suddenly and rapidly. There were a dozen of them, and the man who rode at their head had an evil face, a cruel face, a face that men had learnt to fear in battle, and no woman trusted in peace; and at his side rode a fair-faced boy officer of the Inniskilling Dragoons. A fair-faced boy with the chivalry of a great

nation printed by the Master Painter's hand in every lineament of his Saxon features.

Katrina had stepped to the door; one glance had told her that there was no hope for Paul in flight, for every scout carried his rifle ready in his hand. If Paul made a dash for liberty, he would be done to death before her eyes, and all her woman's soul revolted against the sacrifice. She turned swiftly, "Paul come," with a deft touch of her hand she caused a portion of the masonry near the chimney to revolve, disclosing an aperture large enough to hold a man. Paul looked at her as if the earth had opened, for he knew nothing of the hiding-place. "Quick," she said, "there is no time for talk, I read in an old romance of such hiding-places, and whilst you were away I had this one built. Quick, Paul."

The man's stubborn pride revolted, his brows came down until the eyebrows met between the hard set eyes, the square jaw was set like steel. The woman saw and understood, it was no time for words; picking the baby from the floor, she held him up in mute reproach to the father. In a moment Paul Kotze had stepped into the hiding-place, the masonry revolved, and he was hidden as safely as if the earth had opened to receive him. He could see and hear all that occurred

in the room, but he was powerless to do anything, no matter what might go wrong, he at least was helpless. He gritted his teeth when he realised his position; but he had scant time for thought.

Barely had he been hidden from view, ere the British scouts clattered up to the door. The leader jumped from the saddle, and walked unceremoniously into the house. With one swift penetrating glance he took in the whole scene; the negro wench crouching against the white-washed wall, her crimson headgear slightly awry; the baby crooning on the floor, and the superb looking woman kneading bread by the rough plank table. The gaze he fixed upon Katrina had something more than admiration in it, something which caused the hot blood to sweep upward over neck and cheek and brow; such a glance from a man to a woman was an insult more deep than words, and the young Boer matron felt it in all its bitterness, though her eyes never for one instant flinched before his.

He bent towards her and whispered some words in Dutch, a half laugh playing round his mouth, a mocking devil gleaming from his eyes. The woman drew herself up, until she seemed to tower above the man, tall as he was, then, swift as a swallow flight her shapely arm flew out and her clenched hand

fell full on his mouth. So true was the blow that he reeled a half pace backwards, and a little stream of crimson trickled from the lips driven back on the strong, white teeth. Then swift as thought he stepped in, and grasping the woman by both wrists, in his own iron grip, he kissed her with lips that were as hot as embers in hell. Paul, in his narrow prison, struggled until the veins on his great neck almost burst, but the masonry was thick and strong, and he could only draw deep sobbing breaths and gnaw his lips like a stricken tiger. The child on the floor began to wail dismally; the Kaffir maid fled howling from the house, and Katrina was alone with her insulter.

So they stood for just as long a space as it might take a fleet runner to cover a hundred paces, he flushed, exultant, with the light of Hades in his dark featured face; she, white as the inside feathers on a dove's wing, but the light in her blue eyes was as fierce as the gleam of lightning on a line of bared bayonets. No word was spoken between them, nothing broke the deadly stillness but the wailing of the child, until an armed heel rang on the stone doorstep. A man's figure darkened the doorway. The figure of a man tall and lithe, clad in plain khaki.

Katrina saw for one brief second, a fair, boyish face, a pair of blazing steel-grey eyes.

She heard a curse ripped out in finest Anglo-Saxon. She heard the spurs ring on the slate floor as the khaki-clad figure strode forward with indescribable rapidity, she saw a strong, brown hand launch out from the left shoulder, and then she was free; whilst he, who a moment before had held her a prisoner, lay huddled up in a heap a couple of yards away, with a mark on his face he would carry to his grave, no matter how long the journey might be.

The fair face turned to hers was terribly stern. The soldier lifted his helmet from his head and said: "Madam, if that hound has hurt you, all England shall ring with his shame; believe me, there are few like him in all our Empire."

Katrina looked at him as in all her life she had looked at no other man save Paul only. "There are few like *you* in all the world, I think," she said, and her eyes were eloquent as her tongue, so eloquent that the young officer felt himself blushing like a girl fresh from a convent.

A moment later the other fellow rose, and passing out without a word swung himself into the saddle, and with his men dashed off at a flying gallop. Katrina stooped, lifted her pretty, chubby babe in her arms, and holding him towards the young soldier, said:

"Sir, I will teach him to pray for you night and morning until he is a man, then he will know all, and will understand; and he will pray for you on his own account—for his mother's sake—God send you safe from the wars, sir." The soldier snatched the young one from her arms, kissed him on his little rosebud of a mouth, lifted his helmet and was gone. That day Paul Kotze rode off to join his commando, and Katrina saw his face no more.

. . . .

A battle was raging at Colesberg; steadily General French drove the stubborn Boers back from stronghold to stronghold. Paul Kotze had played the man that day, as he had often played the part before. Always in the front rank, always cool, always steady, yet so full of quiet daring that even the brave men round him wondered. All day long he had glanced along the British lines searching for a dark, savagely handsome face. He had seen the man he sought, fighting like a veritable devil, more than once; but never had been able to cover him with his rifle, and now it was close upon evening. Suddenly a field cornet rode up to the party where Paul was grouped in an open space with a hundred of his comrades.

"Watch that bend at the far kopje," he said, "the British Lancers are coming that way;

they mean to charge you fellows. You must hold this gap no matter what happens, or we are cut off from retreating; pick your men when they are within a hundred yards of you, keep cool, and you can empty every saddle before they can reach you. Paul Kotze, the General says he leaves the officer in charge of the Lancers to you."

Paul nodded, and jerking the magazine of his rifle open, carefully refilled it. Ten seconds later the Lancers trotted round the bend, a tall, fair man rode at their head. Paul saw him wave his arm, the long lances dropped forward, the men stooped low in their saddles, then like a thunderstorm they rolled onwards. The riders plunged the spurs into their horses' flanks, the war steeds laid their ears back and bit savagely at each other, neighing madly as they tore over the veldt with necks outstretched and manes and tails flying in the wind.

Closer and closer they came, until the Boers, waiting with poised rifles, could feel the earth tremble with the thunder of the charge. Then the rifles spoke from the ravine, men reeled in their saddles, lance points dropped, riderless horses dashed forward clear of the ranks. Dull, yellow figures dotted the veldt behind the charging ranks, cheers, mad, meaningless cheers, drowned the yells of the wounded. The broken ranks closed up, on came the war

dogs of England, on, like the blast of a tempest, and at their head, sitting like a rock in his saddle, rode the tall, fair-faced boy officer; the officer whom the Boer General had given into Paul Kotze's keeping.

What had come over Paul the Lion Hunter, the man of matchless coolness, had his nerve failed him at that fateful moment? He who never missed his man when once his finger touched the trigger. Not so. Never had Paul been cooler than at that mad moment, never had his nerve been more under the keeping of his iron will. He had glanced along his rifle barrel and picked a spot fair between the grey eyes of the leader of the British, but even as his finger coiled around the trigger he knew the face he was about to fire upon. He heard, as if a voice from the heavens above had spoken—the voice of his wife Katrina—"God bless you, sir, and send you safe from the war;" and Paul swung his rifle to the right and picked off a lancer, who rode half a horse length behind his leader.

On came the Lancers, the iron-shod hoofs sank deep into the veldt grass. Steed neighed to steed, and blew the foam from their nostrils. Men yelled to men as if hell's floodgates had opened. Then came the shock, the lance points dipped brightly, and rose redly. Roughly clad men threw up their arms and

shrieked the last cry of the dying, as the keen steel swept through breast-bone and back-bone. Bronzed faces grew ashen white in a moment, with the pallor of death. Strong, rough hands gripped madly at the spear shafts, as the steel rushed through lungs and heart, then, as the chargers sped onward, they fell with eyeballs turned skyward, with mouths full of blood, hands limp and lifeless, and Paul Kotze was one of those who went down so sorely stricken that life with him was only a matter of minutes.

So the stretcher-bearers found him with just enough life in him to ask for the leader of the Lancers. The fair-haired Briton bent over the Boer, and heard just enough to know how near he had been to death that day.

"You will save Katrine from *him*," gasped the dying Burgher.

"I will, so help me, heaven. You know him, you say."

"Know him! False to his blood, to his home, to woman, to God. Yes; he was my brother."

XV

THE MAN WHO RISKED IT

XV

THE MAN WHO RISKED IT

In a small town in Upper Burmah, a number of men celebrated in many walks of life had met to investigate certain phenomena presented to the scientific world by one Jarl Ossgood, a Dane. They represented much that was good and great in the world, those men who constituted this group of investigators.

One man was an American railroad king, a person of profound thought, who might have been almost anything in this world, if his boyhood had not been tainted by the crude, bitter knowledge that direct personal poverty brings with it. He had turned his hand and heart to the making of money from infancy, and he had succeeded, but to such a man mere money was not satisfying. When he became vastly rich he knew that he had not won life's battle, knew that *he* never would win it, all that he had now was a golden sword with which to fight; but the best of his life lay behind him, the energy, the powers, the

splendid courage and resource of his youth was gone for ever, burned in the cinders where his golden sword was forged, yet the thirst for knowledge, not the mere knowledge of the schools, which any dolt who possesses a rich father may attain, but the knowledge of things outside the beaten track remained with him in the prime of his life.

There was another man there who had given all his earlier years to a toil that had returned him only fruits which did not satisfy. He was a soldier, a man whom Europe knew as an iron-willed, ruthless man on the fields of war, his name made the enemies of his country tremble, for when he struck he struck with a giant's force, and spared not. Yet he was unsatisfied with the knowledge he possessed, and longed to know what might be beyond the veil.

One other sitting there was nearly great. He had written things that stretched above the heads of men and turned their faces to the skies, a poem that had wings, and when words are winged they fly along the ages, a book that laid its fingers on the heart strings of the masses, but not boldly, forcefully, nobly, but with uncertain strength; it was not great, but it was nearly great, the writer's inborn commonness of soul had marred his masterpiece, yet here and there a touch of splendour killed the greyness and held a world enthralled.

He had written a story too, a short story that carried with it the throb of drums, the scent of blood spilt in battle, the moans of the wounded, the deep-drawn breaths of the dying, the laughter of the victors, the anguish of the vanquished, and through it all, like a thread of scarlet through a woof of white, ran the triumph of the Empire, but the body of the story was thin, a poor, cold, clayey thing, magnetised at times to glorious life—but only one limb at a time. His book, his poem, his short story, all told the one tale. He had flashes of genius that illuminated all he touched; but the body of his work belonged to the earth—earthy.

As for the rest of the investigators, they were men who had all made a mark upon the time in which they lived. One was a great railway engineer, a man who laughed at rivers and mountains that had defied the march of progress for ages; another was the hero of this story, the "man who risked it." He was famous, but he was poor, and now his powers were failing him just when he needed them most, for the wife he loved, the brave, patient little woman who had helped him fight life's battle step by step, was sinking under the unending strain, his boys were growing to that age when their education drained his scanty purse almost dry, and his hand

was losing its cunning. In a few short years the world, the fickle, fleeting world, would forget that he had ever existed, and the last chapters of his life would be spent in misery and want. He did not mind the outlook so much upon his own account, as for the sake of the woman who had trodden the thorny path with him so uncomplainingly.

When he thought of her, his soul writhed in torment, he wanted to make the end of her life a dream of happiness to compensate for all that she had done for him. She had given up home and friends to marry him when he was a poor, unknown youth, with nothing to recommend him but his faith in himself, and a capacity for work which few men in his time could surpass. When the children came, she had sacrificed the greater part of her maternal joys so that she might help the man she had married, though she knew that all his soul was wrapped up in his fame.

But a time had come to him when he saw that the plaudits of mobs, the praise of learned men, the glow and the gush of critics, was not worth one hour of a good wife's love, or one day of the happiness that his beautiful children grouped around a mother's knee could give. Then he looked at his past, turning his chin upon his shoulder he gazed steadily, unflinchingly along the highways of his life, and

saw the milestones standing one by one, and at every milestone he saw a woman standing meekly, patiently, bravely, ready to dress his wounded feet, and he knew that in his search for fame he had been unconsciously brutal, unknowingly selfish, unceasingly cruel, and the knowledge brought remorse. He became feverishly anxious to make money, to store up wealth that joy might come to his wife before it was too late.

She was not an old woman, not more than six and thirty, tall and slender, and almost girlish in her fragility. He would throw fame to the dogs and toil for money. He fell at the feet of the golden calf and worshipped, but the cult of the calf was not for him, money did not, would not come; men called him great, and fed him upon platitudes, but they kept their purse-strings closed, and he had come to Burmah for one of the great journals, in order to earn a pittance. That was how he came to be with those who had gathered to hear Jarl Ossgood, the Dane, tell of a mystery he had unearthed whilst journeying in Thibet.

A commonplace-looking man was Jarl, the Dane, a man whose rough, rugged face gave few signs of the soul that lay behind the veil of clay; but the man who sat next to him was moulded upon lines that the world seldom

sees. Young, black as the breast feathers of a crow, great of stature, silent as the mountain-tops at night, a man whose mere physical gifts would have compelled attention in any assembly. But it was not his length and breadth of limb that held the eyes of the men who sat around him, it was the majesty of intellect that Nature had imprinted upon his face—so might Solomon have looked in the heyday of his glory.

The full black eyes never wavered in the steadfastness of their regard, the brow above the eyes never lowered or frowned, but rested like a rampart fronting an arsenal of intellectual force. The great curving nose rose from between the eyes, and the full, delicately turned nostrils betrayed courage and audacity. The curving lips that hid the white, strong teeth were guiltless of hair, every line was visible, an intensely human face, and yet inhuman in its inflexible calm. It was not a sullen face, nor an austere face, simply a calm unalterable living mask.

Had the soul behind that face been the soul of a sensualist or a slayer of men, he would have been a fiend, a devil stalking the earth, limitless in evil. This was the priest whom Jarl, the Dane, brought with him from Thibet, the man whose mysterious powers he wished a group of wise men to investigate. Long

and earnestly the Dane spoke to the little assembly, telling how, during his wanderings in Thibet, he had fallen in with the priest, who had revealed to him things which both fools and wise men had scoffed at as impossible.

"To him," said Jarl, the Dane, turning with a wave of his arm towards the priest, "to him there is no such thing as death or annihilation, he has crossed the portals, and has held communion with the world beyond, and the people who inhabit it."

At this astounding statement every eye in that assembly was fixed upon the black, immutable face of the priest.

"If that is so, let him tell us what lies behind the veil." It was the soldier who spoke, the leader of armies, and his voice had the crisp, curt ring of command in its every tone.

"That he will not do," answered the Dane; "every man must see for himself, and learn his own lesson. Many may make the journey, if they are willing, but only a few who are worthy will learn the higher secrets."

"Babes can babble like that, but we who are here are not babes," retorted the soldier; "we want deeds not words, proofs not platitudes."

The priest rose from his resting-place, and uprearing his form to its full height, until he

towered a full head over the soldier—and he was a man of great stature—said: "Deeds! you ask for deeds, you shall have them; proofs! you ask for proofs, you shall have proofs; you ask for a sign, I will give you a sign."

His voice was like the far off echo of the sea, so full, so strong, so passionless, so great, and they who hearkened were awed; no charlatan, no mere trickster ever spoke like that.

"You seek knowledge, the knowledge that has no ending, and knowledge waits for the earnest seeker; in my hands lie the keys that will open the gates of wisdom. But first let me tell you the conditions. The man who would know what lies beyond what men call death, must first taste death. He who would know what lies beyond the grave must first lie in the grave. First death, then burial, then the journey to the land where millions upon millions abide, then the resurrection and the return."

"You have passed through all this?" asked the soldier.

"I have passed through it all."

"How long does a man lie in the grave?"

"Until the seasons have come and gone twice."

"He will then return to his own with the knowledge of things eternal?"

"He will come to his own again, and his knowledge will be as the knowledge of the gods."

"If you would sell your knowledge you might reap a harvest of gold greater than any man ever possessed, priest."

"What is gold to me, soldier? I get a cup of water from the spring, a handful of corn, or a cluster of grapes supplies my needs. The air is free to all, the night and the day, the sun and the stars are man's inheritance; the nearer we get to the gods, the further we get from cities and the ways of men hid in cities."

"A man *must* go to the grave to gather the wisdom of the gods, then, priest?"

"There is no other way."

A silence fell upon the group of men—deep, solemn silence—which lasted until the soldier spoke again.

"Your price is too high, priest, a man might learn that which would teach him that his life's efforts are vanity and vexation of spirit."

"A man would learn that the ambitions of men count no more in the scale of creation than the holes the earthworms make in the clay soil by the rivers."

"Better for him if he knew that, if he never returned to humankind," cried the soldier passionately.

The priest looked at him with that wondrous calm which nothing seemed to shake. "You are wrong," he answered; "for when men have risen above personal ambition, and spent their lives toiling day and night for no other reward than the happiness and advancement of all humankind then, and not until then, will the plan of man's redemption be complete, a soldier lives, dies, decays and becomes dust, and ages after, a child, with a little spittle upon its finger makes a plaything out of what had been a conqueror's clay—so much for ambition—but a good deed, nobly done, germinates and begets deeds in its own likeness—a good deed never dies."

"Your price is too high, you ask too much for your knowledge, priest." As he spoke the soldier passed out into the night, and all the rest followed him, until the priest was left alone with his one disciple, Jarl, the Dane.

. . . .

An hour later the American money king and "the man who risked it," were closeted together talking earnestly. The American was speaking.

"I would take no living man's word on a subject of such importance, until I had probed it to the bottom. No, not the word of my own brother," he said; "and yet if ever a man looked as if he could not lie, it is that priest."

"I do not believe he lies," said the other man; "I believe he spoke the truth, and yet, like you, I would not accept his bare assertion; to do so would be to exercise what the fanatics call faith. I prefer to exercise reason, and reason demands proof."

"Is there a man living, I wonder," mused the American, "who would take such a tremendous risk as the priest demands as the price of the fruit of the tree of knowledge? Have you grasped the awful significance of this experiment? If a man were to do just as the priest demands, and if the priest proved to be no mere charlatan, no impostor, but a God-sent messenger to man, then the daring mortal would be brought into contact with forces which created the worlds, not this planet alone, but all that exists, all the forces that govern it to-day. If there is a heaven he would see it, if there is a hell he would behold its terrors. Think of all that it means. Could a man, a mere man, gaze upon those scenes and bear to live as a man again? I would give much to meet such a man."

The other sat very silent thinking, thinking, always thinking. He saw the woman who had given up all for him, sinking to a premature grave, worn out by life's bitter struggle, he looked ahead a few years and saw himself, beaten, broken, his back to the wall, his feet

in the mire of defeat. He saw his boys growing to manhood half-educated, scornful of the father who had failed, and failing, left them nothing but a name, a mere empty name—and his soul sickened.

"You would give much, you say, to meet a man who would risk this thing."

"Much."

"I will take the risk."

"*You?*" The American leaned half across the table in his sudden excitement, "You—impossible! Why, man, the world wants you as you are."

"The world may want me, but the world will starve my wife, and buffet my children. Listen."

Then he told his story while the money king sat and drummed the table with his fingers.

"So," he said at the conclusion, "I am not the only one who has gone wide of the mark, I hunted for money and am not satisfied, though I have enough for any ten men living. You hunted for fame, and having won it, find it hollow; we are like children, my friend, little children seeking strayed cattle in the dark; but you are welcome to enough of my wealth to satisfy your needs."

"Can I give you a share of my fame in return?"

The money king shook his head and smiled. "No," he answered; "true fame is beyond the reach of dollars."

"Then as you can take nothing from me for nothing, neither can I take from you without an equivalent for that for which you have wasted a life, but if you will make my wife's future secure, make my boys' pathway smooth, I will risk this thing of which the priest spoke, and if I come back to the land of living men, will tell you all that I am allowed to tell."

So the compact was made, a soul was bought and sold, not for evil, but that good might come of it, mortals were measuring themselves with the immortal as children measure a mountain with their eyes.

A little way off the edge of a beaten track that led through one of the jungles of Upper Burmah four men were standing around an open grave. One was the Thibetan priest, the man upon his left was his disciple, Jarl, the Dane, on the right of the grave stood "the man who risked it."

The priest spoke, and his voice sounded like wind rippling through the leaves. "To-day our brother dies, and is buried here in the lap of the earth, the clean, brown earth that purifies and cleanses all that is worth cleansing, and rots all that is in itself rotten and vile, when the snow on the mountain-tops

have melted twice, when the corn has ripened and fallen twice before the sickle of the reaper, I shall stand again beside this grave and bid the sleeper awaken, and he will awake, and he shall possess knowledge that few of the sons of men have ever possessed; but first he must die, for death is the door to knowledge."

He passed along the grave-side and stood close to the man whose loyal love for a woman who was his wife, and the mother of his children, made him a willing sacrifice.

"Close your eyes," he commanded.

The victim obeyed. The priest placed his right hand over the man's mouth, with the forefinger and thumb of his left hand he closed his nostrils.

"Do not struggle," he commanded in the same tone he had used before; "obey, and the anguish will be short, death comes easily, life alone is hard."

The victim's fingers twitched, his eyelids fluttered for a moment over straining eyeballs, the veins upon his neck and forehead swelled as though they would burst, his chest heaved in agony, then peace came and he lay white and still in the arms of the priest. If he was not dead, no man ever looked more like death.

For an hour they watched beside him and saw the face fall, the eyes fix in a glassy stare, the hue of the cheeks settle into the cold, dirty

white pallor of death. The American drew his pen-knife and cut the index finger of the left hand to the bone, but no blood came from the wound. Then they buried him and heaped the clean, brown mould on the uncoffined form and left him. The American went towards the coast, and met an epidemic of cholera, and four days after the burial of "the man who risked it," the American was thrown into an unmarked grave, a victim to the greatest of all Eastern scourges.

. . . .

In London, a woman surrounded by four growing boys sat and mourned for her husband, mourned for him as a dead man. No news had reached her concerning the terrible experiment her husband had decided to risk. He had not written her, he had left the whole story in the hands of the American money king, who had promised to go straight to his wife and tell her all, and to give the help she needed; but death had met the American and closed his mouth for all time. Special correspondents of the great dailies had traced "the man who risked it" into Upper Burmah, they kept upon his track until they fell in with the cholera wave, then all the traces ceased, and they, knowing nothing of the Thibetan priest and his mission, put the disappearance of the celebrity down to cholera, and he was duly

chronicled as one of its victims, and his widow, who had given him of the best of her life ungrudgingly, mourned for him and would not be comforted. Letters came to her from many of the world's great ones, deploring his loss, great journals devoted much space to his untimely fate, a nation wept for him—for a day—and left his widow and children to starve—for the widow was poor; and all the time he slept under the soil in the Burmah jungle, poverty crept into his home and dwelt there.

One by one, the little knick-knacks of happier times went to the sale-rooms, the few pictures he had prized, mostly gifts from artists who had known and admired him; then the more solid things went, until the home was bare, and the little that was left was seized by the landlord for the rent. Then came the dreary tramping through London slums in search of cheap lodgings, and the bitter battle for daily bread, and the skies grew greyer and greyer. Had she been alone, death would have come to her, but the motherhood within her kept her alive, she could not die and leave the young things loveless and homeless in the world; she was too unselfish to die.

It came to pass that in her hour of darkest need she met a man, an artist, who had been

one of her husband's dearest friends, a man clever but not great, his brush and his pencil kept him in comfort, though not in wealth, and being a manly man, he helped her willingly—helped her gladly until the grosser souls around made light of her name, speaking of her as his mistress. A cruel taunt from a boy in the street to her eldest son opened her eyes to what was said, and to keep the memory of her dead lover's name pure and free from stain, she refused all further help and prepared to seek another abiding-place, for the tongues of the wicked are cruel.

Then that friend out of his loyal friendship, begged her to become his wife, and she for the children's sake consented.

. . . . .

The snow on the mountain-tops had melted twice, the reaper's sickle had been busy for two summers amidst the golden grain, and once more the Thibetan priest stood in the Burmese jungle, beside the grave where lay the body of "the man who risked it." Beside the priest stood Jarl Ossgood, the Dane.

"His hour has come," said the priest, then kneeling, he scooped the earth away with his hand, tearing aside the weeds and brambles, throwing the brown earth to right and left,

until the face of the sleeper lay exposed to the sunlight. It was the same face, but earth—brown mother earth—had imprinted upon it her unending calm. The priest bent his head and whispered a command: "Sleeper, awake, the hour has come."

And he who slept awoke and rose up and shook the grave rags from him, for all his clothing had rotted and the rags defiled him.

He went to a tiny rivulet that rippled near, and washed, and having washed knew not that he was naked, and the priest bowed before him, for the man had fathomed the wisdom that lies beyond the world. They ministered to him, but neither Jarl, the Dane, nor the priest asked him to share with them his knowledge. His knowledge—what knowledge had he gained? Let the story tell.

Jarl, the Dane, brought him clothing, and placed money for his needs in his purse, and he went forth smiling graciously—smiling on all things as the spring smiles. An aged woman met him on the highway; he stopped and comforted her. An old man bearing a burden beyond his feeble strength tottered along the highway; he took the burden upon his own shoulders and linking his arm in that feeble wayfarer's cried: "Come, brother, the burdens of the weak should be upon the shoulders of the strong."

Surely this man had learnt wisdom—the wisdom of the gods. He passed from place to place and none knew him, his fame had not lasted long enough to hold men's minds for two brief seasons, and yet he had been great. Yet the thought brought no grief, he had learnt the value of many things since the day he had slept. He put his stick into a running stream, and, drawing it forth, looked for the hole and found none. "And that is fame," he said, and smiled, and went upon his journey, going as straight as an eagle to its nest, to that London home where his wife dwelt with his friend. She knew him as soon as her eyes dwelt upon his face, and a great shame fell upon her. He would have taken her in his arms, but she dropped at his feet and clasped her arms around him crying: "I am not worthy; the children hungered, and I gave myself for bread."

At that he lifted her up and held her in his arms, and talked to her to soothe her pain. Then that other came, the friend who had wedded her, and when he saw them a great wrath filled him, for he, too, had learned to love the woman with his whole soul, for she was lovable above the wont of women.

"She is mine!" he cried.

"She shall choose," was the reply.

"She cannot go to you," cried that other one. "She is soiled to you, for she has been my wife."

The man who had risked all for love looked calmly at the woman. "Choose," he said.

"I did it all for love of you, and love of my children.

"Your love was pure," he answered her; "so pure, that the world is better for your loving and your living. Perfect love purifies all it touches."

She crept to him and laid her head upon his breast with a great sigh of content.

"But the child — the unborn child — *my* child," cried that other.

"Not *your* child," said the man who held the woman. "It is the child of your desire, and her sacrifice, and sacrifice claims its reward —it is her child. Come," he said, and they went.

"What have you learnt?" she asked him when he had told her all. "What *is* the wisdom of the gods? Is it fame? is it wealth? is it power?"

And he made answer holding her face in his hands: "It is none of these things. Wealth is nothing, fame is a summer breath on the cheek of a stripling. The wisdom of the

gods is three things—perfect content, perfect love, and perfect charity, but the greatest of of these is the love of a good woman for a selfish man. This I know, for I am 'a man who risked it.'"

XVI

PAUL THE FEARLESS

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PAUL THE FEARLESS

For many years the coming of the spring in the Balkans has been the signal for men who have a blood debt to pay the Turks to form themselves into bands, and sweep silently and swiftly through the rough defiles of the Perrin Mountains, into the hinterland of Macedonia. There they are sure to come to grips with the men they hate, for, to do him justice, the Turk never refuses a fight. The insurgents are grand fighters as a general rule, also; and nothing pleases them better than a flutter with cold steel in some rocky glen, where the pine trees mass the mountain sides so densely that the sunlight scarce can find its way amidst the sombre foliage. Many a grim and grisly fight has taken place there of late years, often ending in the utter extermination of the insurgent bandsmen. Quarter is seldom asked for on either side, and as seldom given. Foot to foot, hand to hand, they fight out their blood

feuds. The mountains ring and re-echo with the trampling of feet, the clashing of steel, and the wild war-cries of the struggling men. When it is all finished, a soldier's grave is given to the comrades of the victors. The carrion bird performs the funeral rites for the foe.

I know of no finer training ground for a young officer who really loves his trade than the ranks of a Macedonian band, bent upon a foray under a good leader. The long, swift marches, the camp by the bivouac fire, the wondrous good fellowship, the red wine in the goat-skin bottles, the fragrant tobacco culled from the village farms, the splendid strategy, the night watches, the surprises, the attack, retreat, the rude surgery, the superb self-reliance. It is all great, in its way, and that is where many a gallant young officer of the Bulgarian army is even to-day learning his trade. Should Bulgaria ever need them, they will make matchless leaders—that is, those who live. The Turk accounts for a good many of them every year.

But they are not all heroes in the insurgent ranks. One man I have in my mind at this moment—a fellow who was known in mockery far and near as "Paul the Fearless"—concerning whom the peasant lasses made songs, which they sang when working amongst the

vines, or when gathering roses for the making of perfumes, or when herding the goats on the hill sides.

I saw him first in the little village of Rustazechin, where I was camping with Colonel Yankoff's band, which had orders to march on the following day into Turkish territory. He made a warlike picture seated upon a mountain mule, carbine slung over his back, bandoliers full of cartridges across his chest, yataghan riding on his hip, pistols in his belt, and hunting knife, long and curved, stuck in his brilliant sash. His fur cap was tilted rakishly on one side of his head, and his fine leather top-boots gleamed in the sunlight. He sang as he rode a wild war-song that set the blood throbbing in my veins, for he had a voice like a silver bugle. "Who is he?" I asked; and a grim mountaineer with scars enough on his body to make a pattern for a carpet, said with a chuckle:

"That is 'Paul the Fearless.' He is going to say farewell to the maidens once more."

"Is he such a devil of a fellow," I queried.

The mountaineer grinned broadly; for, like most of his class, he had a fine sense of humour. "Come," said he, "let us follow 'Paul the Fearless.'"

Our horses were standing by, so we threw leg over saddle, and rode after that singing

figure, and saw the maids come running out of cots and cabins—maids who threw flowers at the hoofs of the mule. The rider bounded from the saddle every now and again, and, cap in hand, made melting speeches to the fair ones. They crowded round him at last, and made garlands with which they decked both man and mule, whilst he sang wild, pulsating, soul-stirring border songs, with the clash of steel in the liquid notes—songs that made a man hear the galloping of horses and the ripple of musketry; songs that made one see wounds, red and dripping, with a background of burning, smoking hamlets, and fleeing women running hot-foot from the ravishers.

"Tell me concerning this man," I said to my comrade, the big mountaineer; "why do the maids honour him? Is it because he has a voice like an angel?"

"For seven years I have gone with the bands into Turkish territory," answered he. "My father and four of my brothers went with me the first year. I am the only one left; maybe this will be my last journey. (It was; but that tale would take some telling.) Every year 'Paul the Fearless' has done as you see him doing to-day. His heart is full of fire; he is a war-note on the wind. He bids adieu to the maids in each village,

and bids them think of him in their prayers, should he fall by the hand of a Bashi Bazouk on some red field. He means it all—now, but when he gets into the mountains, his blood will grow chill, and by the time the Turkish watch-fires are sighted, his courage will all have run out of his finger-tips, he will desert, and run away, as he always has done. The maids will mock him when he comes home, and he will sulk for nearly a year; but next spring he will be out on the war-path again. He says he will die for his country, some day, and so he will—die of old age."

When the band under Yankoff moved off, the fearless one rode in front on his mule, and right gallantly he did scouting work, knowing well that no foe was near us, but at the first sign of a Turkish patrol, he made a rapid move to the rear amidst a ripple of laughter from the whole band. The fighting men called jeeringly to him, but all Paul's battle fever had evaporated, and his white lips framed no song; but the hoofs of his mule made rapid music on the road to safety,

That night was to be his last in camp; he was ill, he said, ill in mind and body. The raw rude air of the mountains did not agree with him, neither did the sound of Turkish rifles that sent the lead zip-zipping in our direction during the evening. He slunk out

of camp and deserted in the soft starlight, and as he rode back there met him two mountain maids who were carrying wine to a villayet. They knew the deserter, and being out for a frolic, hid themselves, one upon each side of the narrow pass, and as the warlike one came abreast of them they sprang down upon him with wild shrieks and screams, knocking him from the saddle. In the fall he struck a boulder with his forehead, and cut a nasty jagged wound that bled furiously. In fear he scrambled to his feet and drew his yataghan, yelling like a thing demented all the time, for his fancy filled the pass with Bashi Bazouks; then he fled, slashing in his fury at everything he saw, or fancied he saw, whilst the frolicsome wenches pursued him, screeching Turkish war-cries as they ran. Into the village wine-shop he burst, blade in hand, with his tunic covered with gore, and the mountain men, used to sudden raid and lightning foray, grasped their weapons and sprang out to meet the foe; but all was silent in the pass.

Slowly they drew off, and Paul told his tale, a wild, weird tale, of a hand-to-hand struggle with foes whose number increased each time he told the story—five, seven, a dozen Bashi Bazouks had beset him, and sternly fighting he had won his way to safety.

They looked at the ugly wound on his forehead, on the still wet blood on his garments, on the notches in his yataghan, and believed, until the mountain maids arrived leading a mule. And then the hills rang with their mirth, and the maids made a song that fitted a mule and a man as a hair shirt fits a cat.

XVII

A BUNCH OF ROSES GATHERED IN THE WEST

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A BUNCH OF ROSES GATHERED IN THE WEST

"It is useless, your Reverence, I am past praying for."

"You are wrong, my son, no man is past the power of prayer."

The man on the rude bunk in the tattered tent smiled grimly back in the priest's face, but made no verbal reply: yet in that one quick smile there was a lifetime of scorn and bitterness, and the priest looking down with pitying glance on that hard, stern, unyielding face, upon which the twilight of death was fast settling, knew intuitively that a wild and wasted life was ebbing to its close. He stooped and ran his soft white hand over the brow which carried many a furrow that years alone had never placed there, for he who lay with one foot on the border-line of life, and one upon the outer edge of the unprospected hills of eternity,

was a young man still—young as the years are counted—old in adversity and iniquity.

Outside the tent the night was calm and still, excepting where a burst of rude laughter, or the chorus of a song rang out from one of the many groups of diggers who were gathered around their camp-fires on "Minter's Gully," for the "boys" were "on" gold in Kurnalpi, and a day of toil was ended usually by a night of riot. Now and then the noise fell upon the ears of the dying man, and he would smile wearily, as if the old familiar echoes brought with them mingled joy and pain.

The priest looked down upon the broad shoulders, and the white, round arms, that looked almost womanly in their nudity, and he knew, for he was a man of the world as well as a priest, that the wreck before him was the remnant of an athlete. He did not know the man except by repute, and the reputation he had borne was an evil one. He had heard of him as a cynic in his sober moments, and as a savage in his cups. A sneering, reckless, ruthless devil, possessing neither love nor reverence for things either human or Divine. One who knew no fear and had no faith; ready at all times to throw a taunt in the teeth of men, and a libertine laugh in the face of women.

Men said he was one who would give his last crust to a starving dog, and his last curse to a woman—and yet women had liked him as much us men had hated him, and he repaid their liking with careless lust and mocking contempt, until they said that his blood was wine, but his heart was ice, for he was fair to none, and faithless to all. And now he was hovering on the very boundary-line of his life's lease, so close to Hades that he could almost see the mining experts in the sulphur mines of the hereafter.

"You had better leave me, father."

"I cannot leave you to die alone, like a dog, my son. Is there not one man in all the camp whose hand you would like to clasp before the end comes?"

Again the cold smile flashed over the clean cut face. "Not one, father, no, not one; neither here nor in all the earth. Do not rats leave a sinking ship? Friends are true until the bank breaks; then good-bye to friendship. I know, for I have tried them, father, and I'd rather die alone like a wounded dog than have those I don't believe in with me in an hour like this."

"Is there no woman, my son, whose hands can close your eyes and soothe the last dark hour? A woman's sympathy is sweetest when the darkest hours are deepening. Tell

me, my son, and no matter whom, or what she may be, I will bring her to you if she is within my reach."

"A woman, father! There is not one in all God's earth whose hand could help me now."

"Then let me pray with you, for there is one Friend to whom the friendless can turn when earth holds none. You are not of my faith, but as a man and a sinner let me kneel and pray for your immortal soul."

"No, not that, father! Let me die as I have lived — friendless — faithless — Godless, and alone."

"I *will* not leave you, though you are stubborn in your sin; even to the doors of death, I will go with you."

"How long shall I live, father?"

"Two hours, my son."

"Then let me talk if you *will* stay, and when the end comes, take from beneath my pillow a bunch of withered roses, and place them in my dead hand."

"Is that all, my son?"

"It is all, father."

Then for many minutes the dying man lay still, with white, set face, looking backwards down the plains and gullies, and over the hilltops of a wasted life, and when he

spoke his voice had lost its rough, rude tone, and he talked as well-bred men of the cities talk. "Shall I take you back over twelve years with me, father?"

And the priest bowed his head, and went on praying silently.

"She was my wife, father. Only a slip of a girl, with a gentle, tender face. I can see her now as I could see her then, smiling in all the grace of girlhood—the bonniest, proudest face in all the south land—she loved me then, and I loved her too. I can see the cottage in the hills—the little white cottage, that was built like a bird's nest—half shrouded in trees. I can smell even now the moss roses and wild geraniums that straggled all over the great wilderness we called our garden, and the hedge of wild furze that skirted the road. I can see it now as plainly as I used to see it morning and night as I jumped my horse over it—and the little creek bordered with pear-trees, where she and I used to sit in the hot noontide in the honeymoon days, and talk of love and the future—I can see it all, father."

And the priest went on with his praying.

"I can see him too; my firmest, bravest friend. I see him now, with his strong face, looking so kingly in the calm of an unspotted life, and the sight of that face brings back a

pain that deadens the anguish of the gunshot wound in my side."

And the priest paused awhile in his praying.

"We were friends from boyhood, father, he was a churchman, though not of your faith, and he stood by my side when my wife and I were married, and his lips were the first to wish us long life and happiness, and his hand was the first we clasped as man and wife. He was my friend, and in all the wide earth there was none whom I loved as I loved him, for he had stood between me and trouble from childhood."

"And he wronged you," murmured the priest, with white, set face.

"Listen, father! One night my horse had gone lame with me as I rode homewards, so I threw the bridle over my arm, and walked up the hillside, and neither the hoofs nor my footsteps made any sound on the deep grass that grew there, so together the old bay horse and I reached a gap in the hedge that faced my bedroom window, and I was passing through, when I saw a man standing in the garden, his head just reached above the window-sill. Are you listening, father?"

"Go on to the end," said the sorrowful voice of the churchman.

"I saw him, and knew him; it was my friend—the friend of a lifetime. Then the

window opened, and my wife leant down, and I saw that she had robed herself for her slumbers. I saw the gleam of the lamp on her bright brown hair, and on the white gown, on her arms and neck, as she leant far out of the window. In her hand she held a bunch of roses—the same that now lie beneath my pillow. She raised the roses to her lips, and kissed them, then gave them to him, and he, with a light, happy laugh turned with the flowers in his hand, and walked with swift, steps to the gap in the hedge, where I stood — and I — oh, God! I did not speak. I could not speak; my tongue was as iron in my mouth, and the wild blood of the hot south was singing in my veins.

"He stopped with a little start of surprise when he saw me, then came on with outstretched hand. I, dashing his hand aside, felled him to the earth, with one blow of my hand, and kicked him as a man kicks a hound that has bitten the hand that fed him. Then he staggered to his feet, and faced me with his face all bathed in blood, and being a man, he struck back, and then, I scarcely know how it was done — it was an old wrestling trick I had learned in the gymnasium—but his back was across my knee, my forearm was across his throat, and I threw all my weight on the curve of his neck. There was a quick, sharp sound

as if something in his back had broken—one low, bitter, awful cry left his lips, and he lay dying at my feet."

And the priest went on with his praying.

"Then I picked him up in my arms as though he had been carrion, and with him I took the little bunch of roses, and, passing through the house, I carried my burden into my wife's bed-chamber, and threw the man and the roses at her feet.

"She, being a woman, understood it all without words. She went down upon her knees beside the limp body; taking his face between her hands she pressed it to her bosom, and kissed the white lips; whilst I, mad, with the madness of a devil untamed, heaped taunts upon her head and his. And I stood by, and saw her struggle with her broken load, until she placed the dying man upon her bed—her bed and mine; and then she turned, and, taking from my pillow, where she had pinned it, a letter, gave it to me, with the one word *coward* on her tongue, and then sped away into the night to bring a physician, who lived close by, and I was left alone with him and the letter she had given. I read it through from end to end, and then all Heaven and Hell seemed to open, and the air was full of condemnation.

"I looked up at last—looked at the form

upon the bed, and saw the big, black eyes of him I had loved fixed upon my face, with such a gaze of yearning love and pity, that all the marrow froze in my bones; and, with one bitter cry, I asked my God to let the hills fall down and cover me. He called my name, and I crept close to him. He drew my head down, and he kissed my lips, and, out of his great love, forgave me all—and from the letter in my hand, and from his dying lips that never lied, I knew that he had come that night to tell my wife how that evening he had won the promise of her dearest friend to be his wife; and she had given him the roses to take as a sweet token of her fond regard, with wishes for a happy, hopeful life.

"And when they came to him, and told him that his life was sapped; and that the shroud, and not the bridal garb, must be his portion, he told them all it was an accident—a horse's blunder in the darkness did it; and then he placed my hand within my wife's and asked her, for the Man of Nazareth's sake, to let the past be buried with him. But from that hour to this I have been a vagrant on the face of the earth—a wanderer without friends or resting-place. My punishment has never ceased by night or day, and every hour has been to me a living death. I never met a man to call him comrade, but he betrayed my trust,

and laughed at me until I learned to loathe the very voice of man. I have known no woman in these long, accursed years who has not turned, when trouble touched me, or else grew weary of me as a passing toy. So I grew weary of the ceaseless pain, and with my own hand I have paid the penalty of the unpardonable crime, for a life for a life must be given. Father, place the bunch of roses so that they will hide the gunshot wound, through which my life is ebbing. Throw the tent wide open, and let me see the camp-fires glisten once again — so this must be the ending."

And the priest closed the tired eyelids, and went on with his praying.

XVIII

THE WOOING OF BEN ASSA

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THE WOOING OF BEN ASSA

BEN ASSA we called him. He had a name which his father and mother had given him in his native land, but it was not suitable to our English tongue, so we re-christened him Ben Assa. Why? God knows! Why do we do half the things we do in life?

I had come to know the fine, soldierly-looking man through visiting one of the camps occupied by the Afghans. Not the main encampment, which lies on the flat at the foot of the eastern end of Coolgardie, but a smaller camp which lies near where the miniature ranges kiss the sand plain on the northern side of the mining town. A little curly-headed lad of mine had wandered away from home into the bush, bird-nesting, and had strayed off the track; when, with a child's terror, he had run on and on through the scrub, wild with fright, until he sank down exhausted at the foot of a quondong tree as

the night was closing in; and it was there that Ben Assa found him whilst watching his men hobbling out his camels for the night. He had picked the little one up in his arms, and had carried him to his tent, and fed the young one with dates and other delicacies of his people; and had then tucked him securely in his own warm bedding, and had charged one of his countrymen to sit and keep watch over the child, whilst he had tramped in to tell me the little one was safe.

He looked out of place in the front room of our tiny cottage, with its modern furniture. There was a rough barbaric splendour about the man that would have suited a more warlike setting. He was a big man, tall and broad and muscular; and his dress—for he, with quaint Oriental dignity, had put on his best apparel to visit me in my home—was redolent of old Eastern lands. His turban rose, fold over fold, high above his forehead, and it blazed into many brilliant colours. His outer garment, cut somewhat in the shape of the jacket worn by our grandfathers, was of rich ruby velvet, lined with quilted pink silk. The under garment, which showed his mighty chest in all its broad breadth, was of finest white cambric. His lower garments were made of spotless calico, and seemed to contain material enough to clothe a European family.

Around his loins he had twined a great green silken scarf, fold upon fold, reaching from the hip to the centre of the stomach. His face was handsome; there was something in the broad, bold forehead, the protruding brow, the full, black eyes, the large, strong, clearly-cut nose, and the resolute jaws, that told in language that nature prints in tints that never lie, that the man was the descendant of a race who had lived by the sword. He looked a fighting man from brow to heel. The short, black, curly beard that, falling from his chin and cheeks, just kissed his white bernouse, harmonised well with the dark brown hue of his skin. His large, sinewy, shapely hands spoke of familiarity with weapons of war. They might be at home on the bridle of an Arab stallion, or on the hilt of a sabre, or the haft of a border raider's spear; but never on tools that betoken drudgery and mechanical toil. So I first met Ben Assa.

Later I grew into the habit of calling at his camp, and of an evening, when his men were idle, and the long string of camels were unburdened, and turned out to pasture on the harsh Westralian scrub fodder, I would sit with him, and smoke and listen to the story-teller of the tribe chant in wild, weird tones, the folklore and battle songs of his

people, whilst the everlasting tuneless clapper and tom-tom in the hands of native musicians made life a burden.

At first they received my presence amongst them coldly, but always treated me courteously; for it is as natural for an Oriental of the fighting class to be courteous, as it is for a low-bred European to be rude. But as time passed on, Ben Assa thawed towards me, unbending from his dignified reserve, slowly and by gentle gradations, just as the moon fills gradually towards its fulness. At first we see a tiny streak of silver in the sky, and then as night follows night the silver sentinel expands, until, when its hour has come, it fills out and becomes the eye of heaven. So it was with Ben Assa. Slowly and by almost imperceptible degrees he thawed towards me, and unbent, and then he told me tales that have not yet been written, and, maybe, never will be, by English chroniclers, at any rate. He had fought against the British troops, sometimes with the tribe of hillmen, of whom his father's elder brother was the chief, and sometimes he had fought with the regular Afghan army against the red-coats, and he had many scars and no medals to show for it all.

"For what reason did you fight against the British troops, Ben Assa?" I asked him one

night as we sipped our coffee and smoked the sweet tobacco which he gets from—heaven knows where—and prepares—heaven knows how; but I have blown a lot of it skyward.

Ben Assa looked at me for a moment, drumming his fingers on the dried sheep-skin bottle at his side. Then he said: "You are of this country—of Australia. The home of your father is here. She who gave you birth is here. The wife of your heart, she too is here, and your children, though at times your feet have roamed afar. He whom I have found lost in the forest, and others beside him are here. Have I spoken the truth?"

"You have spoken the truth, Ben Assa."

He smoked thoughtfully for awhile; then he said: "And, my brother, would you fight if some day a strange people marched into your country with flags flying and drums beating, trampling on your laws, overturning your government, defiling the grave of your father, preaching a religion you had been taught to hate, introducing customs you abhorred, and deposing your ruler, taking from you your lands, and making you a bond-race—you who have always been free men. If the Japanese landed here to-morrow with arms in their hands, as some day they surely will, would you fight?"

"Yes, Ben Assa; I and those I have bred would fight."

"You would slay, and spare not?"

"Yes, Ben Assa; it would come to pass, even as you have spoken. It is a man's right."

"That is what happened to us. The English came, and we fought them—I, amongst others. Of my tribe who dwelt amongst the Khyber hills, there is none left, excepting when here and there one is scattered far and wide like unto myself. The English are a great people; but what is to be is written by the fingers of Fate on the walls of Destiny."

"You think harm will come to England, Ben Assa?"

"As certainly as grass follows rain. Russia wants India, and what the Russian wants he gets to-day or to-morrow. A little later or a little sooner. What does it matter? Time counts for nothing, especially with the Russian. Defeat may come to the Muscovite; but it will only check him for a time. But you and I will not talk of war, let us talk of something else. This is a land that has never known a war, and it can never be the home of a great people, until the children pluck flowers from battlefields to put on the graves of heroes. You can have no history without heroes. You can have no heroes without war. Eu, hu! let us talk of something else."

"Let us talk of love then, Ben Assa; men who have fought much, must have loved much. The hot blood that runs riot in war time must turn towards women in peace time. The wide world never held a fighter yet who was not a lover of women; the greater the fighter the stouter the lover."

"Eh, hu!" laughed Ben Assa; and his great chest heaved, and his coal-black eyes blazed, and his black beard quivered, whilst the white teeth, like a wolf's fangs, showed through the jetty curls. "Eh, hu!" and he laughed again; and a flush like fire seemed to burn under the dusky skin, and the earthenware pitcher in his hands cracked and went to pieces with the strength of his grip.

"Love," he said. "Eh, hu! How do you, who come of a young people who have never known real war, come to understand the ways of warriors so well. Eh, hu! but the love of fighting breeds the love of women. I have ridden far in my native land by sunlight and starlight to touch the lips of a woman. Aye! so have I ridden when I knew not but each tree in the ravines that I rode through carried a rifle that would settle me and my wooing."

"Have you never married a woman, Ben Assa?"

"I had a wife who was no wife—a girl with a face like a flower. She, who should have

been the mother of many war-like sons, never suckled a child."

"Tell me about it, Ben Assa, if so be it is a tale a man may tell without hurt or shame to himself?"

"There is nothing of shame left—it died when she and he died. For the shame of a deed belongs only unto the doers thereof, and not unto those who, though standing near, take neither part nor lot in the deed. So has our Prophet taught us."

"The woman you wedded—she is dead then?"

"She is dead. It is a tale that needs little telling. Thousands have lived, loved, and died who could have told such a story. Is your pipe sweet to your lips? The tobacco is there in the goat-skin pouch within reach of your hand. See to your comfort. Eh, hu! I would sooner listen than talk, but if talk I must, why, 'tis the will of Allah—so listen.

"She was of our tribe, the daughter of one who had fought by my side when the hillmen were at war one with the other, and he clave to my side when we raided the borders and lifted the horses of Hindu and Englishmen. No better spear ever rode than her father, and he gave her to me in her childhood, as is the custom with us, and I waited until she had reached the age when a girl is no longer a

girl, and is not yet a woman. The time of her life was like that moment of time which is neither claimed by the night nor the morning — a night scarcely finished, a day scarce begun—so was it with her when I claimed her in marriage.

"Beautiful! Yes; but there were others as good to look at in Afghanistan. Still, she filled my eyes in those days, and I hungered to own her, though I had little time for love, for the hillmen had risen and had rallied around the green banner, and our priests were preaching words that no soldier's son could hear and not heed. I had gone with my people into the first shock of the trouble, and had come back to the hills to gain strength from the weakness that had followed my wounds, and I had brought with me a prisoner, —a Russian officer—our men had captured one they believed to be a spy in the pay of the British; and I saved him only by covering him with lance and sword. He carried himself like a soldier when death was so close to his eyes that he could feel the chill of the grave on his cheek, and I, liking the way he had smiled when the lance point pressed the white skin on his throat, succoured him and brought him home to my people.

"The morning I took her to wife, the news came to our camp that Roberts had taken

Kandahar, and every man who could sit in a saddle was wanted close up to the front to cut off supplies and harass the English. There was no time for love-making, so I took her but once in my arms and caressed her, and she, as became her breeding, buckled my sword-belt, and held my stirrup, whilst I mounted and rode away to the war. Aye, I rode away, leaving her just as I found her—a wife who knows nothing of wifehood.

"For three months I moved with my men from flank to flank, and from rear to front of the British forces, cutting off straggling parties, raiding the camps at midnight, forcing the fighting, though we knew the great English general had made the one move that meant ruin to Afghanistan; but the men who moved under me were the pick of all the border reivers, and loved the life in a saddle.

"Three months to a day since I caressed my wife, and rode out with my spearmen, and there came to me one who brought me tidings that made the blood almost burn through my skin. He who came was a cripple—a half-brother—brother to me by a fault of my father's. My mother sent him. My wife had betrayed me, so that the women made mock of my name when they whispered together.

"The Russian officer, whose life I had risked my own to save, had been false to me, though

he had sat below my salt. Then, when tired of his toy, he had fled, and entered the English lines for protection, and lay, even then, snugly at Kandahar. If I returned to my people, to deal with the woman, he would escape me; if she lived, my father's name would be defiled. So I called her sire, the man who gave her to me to wife, and to his beard I told him the tale that my mother had told me, and he, loosening his sword in its sheath, spoke to my face:

"'By Allah and our prophet, I will go to your people, and if this thing be not as you have told me, see that thy sword-arm be free when we meet again, no matter where or when. I will turn neither to the right hand nor to the left, till I know the whole truth of this thing.' And I, watching him ride away, knowing my mother's words were true, turned my horse's head and rode towards Kandahar, and my comrades, knowing all, mourned for me as for one already dead.

"Straight through the British lines, with my sword on my hip, and my lance to my right hand, I rode, and the men, knowing me well, marvelled to see me.

"The guard turned out, and took me straight to that wonderful little man, Roberts —the man of the midnight marches — and when I gave him my sword, and laid my

lance at his feet, in token of conquest, and swore never again to raise hand or horse against the White Queen, he held out his hand, and we clasped each the right hand of the other, as soldiers and men, and he, with his own hands, gave me back the sword that had been mine, and my father's, and my father's father's before me, and I went out to look for the man who had wrought me dishonour, and I found him.

"He knew, without words, that he and death were once more close together, but he laughed and beckoned me to follow him, touching his sword hilt as a token that he understood what I wanted, and we, without words, walked to a spot where no loiterers could see us, and then he paused, and I came almost upon him with my blade still in its sheath. He turned, and, drawing like lightning struck at me fiercely; but I had not followed my trade on the borders all those years without learning the tricks of the business, and, avoiding his rush, I drew and we fought.

"He was mine from the moment the steel met, and we both of us knew it. He was brave, but as I played with him, holding his rushes off and wounding him slightly, just to let him see how helpless he was in my hands, passing my blade close to his eyes, when I

could have severed his head from his shoulder joint, when, had I wished it, I could have opened a way to his heart, I saw the white rings of death draw round his mouth and under his eyes; but I would not kill him. Three months of treacherous joy he had passed with the wife of the man who had saved his life, and a swift death was not for him. Each time I beat down his guard, or forced up his sword-arm, I feinted to strike the blow that would have ended the matter, and each time held my hand so that he died a score of times before his right arm, grown limp and weary, fell by his side, and his sword dropped at my feet; then I drew my blade across his body betwixt the hips and the chest, as a footman hamstrings a horse, and he fell shrieking in the dust at my feet, and I left him to linger the night out. The night watches had brought him pleasures, so I left him to wait for the stars, and death and the jackalls, that he knew would gnaw at his flesh before morning. . . ."

"And the woman, Ben Assa? Did you never hear what became of the woman?"

"She, too, looked up to the stars. Her father rode to the camp in the hills and demanded the truth, and they brought her forth, and the women all spoke with one voice; and she, knowing the worst had come

to her that can come to a woman, knelt at her father's feet and bared her neck, and asked for the mercy of the sword; but he who came from the old mountain stock, who believe that a woman's dishonour is worse than a man's death, refused her request, and carried her far into the mountains, and, according to the old rule of the hills, tied her with thongs by the neck and the wrists, and the ankles, to the hard earth, with her face to the sky that she might look up to Allah, and see in the pitiless sky that there was no pity for her."

"So, Ben Assa, that is the tale of your courtship and the laws of your hillmen."

"It is even so. What do you think of our ancient customs?"

"Ben Assa, I think that the hills of Afghanistan are the healthiest hills for a man, with a weakness for women, to keep away from, on all the earth. Reader, what do *you* think?"

XIX

A COOLGARDIE IDYLL

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A COOLGARDIE IDYLL

JEPSON was young—that is, he was young in years; but he had no young follies. Jepson never drank to excess, and he never lost an opportunity of sneering at any man who did.

Jepson never by any chance allowed himself to dangle in the train of any woman, and he had a most emphatic manner of expressing his opinions about those who did. Not that Jepson was too moral for that sort of thing, but rather that the blood in his veins was incapable of being warmed above freezing point by anything except the clink of yellow metal—and yet, Jepson was married. He had said to himself that a woman was a handy thing to have about the house, so he had looked about him before coming to the gold-fields, and had picked out a girl who would suit him, and he married her. She was good to look upon—fair-haired, blue-eyed, with a tall, shapely, lissome figure. She was also well educated,

and possessed a gracious disposition, and an average amount of intellect; but these latter points did not count with Jepson. He wanted a machine-made woman, one who could dress well, and look well at a small cost, and keep a home about him that would be an advertisement for him—Jepson.

Long before they arrived at Coolgardie the girl-wife had tried to interest her husband in the affairs that so deeply concern a woman, but Jepson froze all that out of her before the honeymoon was at its full. She had tried mildly and graciously, as only a woman who wants to please can try, to get at his religious views, but Jepson had curtly informed her that he had no views. He regulated his religion according to the religious principles of the people with whom he came in contact. As for her soul — well, he really did not care whether she possessed anything of the kind; and if she did, he advised her to put it in leading strings, and stand prepared to farm it out on the best terms possible as occasion might demand.

She promptly abandoned the subject, thinking that perhaps she had inadvertently stepped upon a sore spot, and she shifted her ground to other and more feminine topics, but Jepson simply looked at her with a cold glance, and

requested her not to plague him with womanly foolishness; if she wanted to talk about children she had better make friends with some other woman and talk to her. The poor, young wife wept cruelly over the conduct of her husband, and as a consequence appeared at breakfast in the mornings with red eyelids and black-circled eyes, and then Jepson scowled, and wanted to know if she was going to walk the earth as an advertisement for an anti-matrimonial league. So by degrees she froze into a sort of wooden woman, and became just what Jepson wanted —a handy sort of thing to have about the house.

When Jepson got well down into harness in Coolgardie he did fairly well, for he was anything but a fool. He was a cold, shrewd, calculating sort of man who never drank, gambled, or flirted with the "scarlet robe." He moved in the ranks of the better class set in the great gold camp, and was quoted by long-headed business men as a man who was certain to make his way in the world.

But there came a day when Jepson wanted money, and wanted it badly. He sat down and schemed. He thought out all the honest ways first, but could see no path out of his difficulties. Then he planned villainy. But he was not the class of man to risk his all

on a bold stroke in knavery. He planned a forgery as skilfully as he could—and he could be skilful above the average. Then he converted himself into a detective, and tested his own scheme, and came to the conclusion that it was too risky. So he at once abandoned the idea of forgery.

He next elaborated a scheme of embezzlement which seemed pretty nearly perfect. Again, he converted himself into a detective, and again he found a flaw in his own plan, and abandoned it. He next worked out a beautiful plot to forge scrip and run it on the market; and he finally settled on this plan, until it dawned upon him that he would have to take others into his confidence, and he was not the sort of person to do that, so the "scrip" business fell through as the others had done. And Jepson was almost at his wit's end to know what to do, when he remembered that amongst his clients there was a wealthy Afghan who might help him over his financial wall.

Yadoo Mahomet Kurda was young, tall, robust. He had black hair, a black beard, and great sleepy black eyes, which when they rested on the face of a woman, could leap into fire and blaze like quartz crystals on a hot day. His complexion was dark olive, and his

teeth were as white as the soul of a girl baby. He dressed beautifully, and was picturesquely handsome in his Oriental way. Green and gold was his turban, deep dark crimson his jacket, white as clouds at dawn his bernouse, and white his great wide trousers. Around his loins he wore a scarf of mingled green and gold, and crimson silk, and upon his fingers rings of great value and beauty. Such was Yadoo Mahomet Kurda. He was never in a hurry, and never out of temper. He had a low, round, soft, fat voice—he owned much money in cash, in camels and land, did Yadoo Mahomet Kurda, and that was his chief and only attraction in the eyes of Jepson.

So Jepson decided to invite the Afghan to his home, to talk over with him the much-vexed question about which the people of the gold-fields were raving loudly to the Government, demanding that all Afghans be transported out of the colony. Yadoo Mahomet Kurda accepted the invitation, and went.

Then for the first time he saw Jepson's wife, and Jepson, who was watching him, saw the big black eyes change suddenly from soft slumbering tranquillity to blazing liquid light, and Jepson knew that he had the Oriental sybarite well within his reach.

At that time Mrs Jepson had no idea of the part she was expected to play.

Jepson sat in his armchair and smoked and talked. The Afghan lolled on his low couch and watched Mrs Jepson under his thick, heavy, eyelids; she sat and worked embroidery, and knew nothing.

That was the first visit, a little later and the Afghan was invited again. He came with alacrity, and Jepson smiled under his moustache as he noticed that everything the Oriental wore was rich, and of the finest material, whilst his brown fingers were heavy with rings, set with rare gems. During the evening Jepson did most of the talking, the Afghan bowing gravely at times, and at intervals putting or answering a question; but his eyes followed the figure of Mrs Jepson every time she moved, and took in every detail of her figure, every curve of her form, which the soft folds of her evening dress displayed so charmingly—Jepson had designed that dress.

So it came to pass that Yadoo Mahomet Kurda was a constant guest at the home of the Jepsons, and Jepson borrowed much money at his hands, whereof he told his wife —nothing.

One night, it was a hot night in December,

and the window of the sitting-room was thrown wide, Mrs Jepson was leaning out watching the stars come forth one by one whilst the men talked in low lazy monotones. Suddenly silence fell upon the place, then she heard her husband quit the room, and the next moment she felt a breath upon her neck, just where the little waving curls kiss the spine. She turned and saw the big Afghan. His breath came quick and sharp, with a half hiss between his teeth. There was a dusky deep-red flush on his bronze cheeks, and the hand that touched hers trembled.

She had no need to ask questions. Her woman's instinct told her in one moment of time what the scene meant. She drew away her hand rapidly, and as she did so she felt something in the palm. She looked and saw the great diamond ring that Yadoo Mahomet Kurda was wont to wear upon the third finger of his right hand. She clenched her little hand and struck him in the mouth. He caught her by the wrist and pressed the clenched hand to his lips once, twice, and a third time. Then the door opened and Jepson entered. He either did not, or would not see the tragedy in the two faces.

"The night looks beautiful—very beautiful."

It was the low, round, fat voice of the alien that fell upon his ears, and Jepson did not notice the faint tremor in the full tones.

Five minutes later the garden gate had clicked behind the visitor, and an indignant, outraged woman was standing before Jepson, her figure was drawn up to its full limit, her face was aflame with rage and shame. Her outstretched hand held a big diamond ring.

She told to Jepson what I have told to you — "a black man," she sobbed, "a vile black brute. I did not speak whilst he was here; I thought—I feared you might shoot him. Oh, Jim, in our own house, our own home—from a black man, too."

Jepson did not take the sweet, fair face and press it to his breast to let her hide her burning womanly shame. Jepson always prided himself on being a man of business. He stretched forth his hand and took the ring and looked into the sparkling stone, and turned the bauble round and round so as to catch the light in a score of ways.

"Throw it out of the window, Jim, dear; throw it after the black beast."

He smiled. "Throw it after him? Do you know its value? It is worth five hundred guineas if it is worth a pound. Throw it after the black fool! not much!"

She looked at him for the space of time it would take a hack to cover a hundred yards. All the colour in her body was in her face, and over her neck and breast, and an eternity of contempt was in her eyes, and then she laughed outright; but the laugh was worse to hear than the soft sob of a wounded horse in the dark. When she spoke she said: "I—do—know—the—actual—price—of—that—ring—now."

"Yes," he said, raising his eyebrows enquiringly; "actually."

"Yes, actually; it is a wife's shame—a husband's villainy."

"Shame be damned! You are no fool. The idiot has lost his head over you. Play him for the fool he is, and keep on the safe side all the time. The cards are all in your hands if you have the nerve and judgment to play them; but mind, not a step too far. Remember you are my wife."

She walked to the door with head erect, and, turning on the threshold said, oh! so sweetly: "A wife, yes, a wife; but no wanton was ever held more cheaply."

Time dealt kindly with the Jepsons, and much money came to them, but Jepson was not content. He wanted to make one big coup and land himself amongst the "fat men"

of the world. One big brilliant stroke in mining would make him, but he dreaded the risk. He feared a fall. It was then that his wife came to his aid once more.

"Make your money over to your wife," she said; "and then if you fail you will not be left penniless, and my child, that is to be, will have the money that of right belongs to its father," and the thing seemed good in his eyes, and he did even as the woman had counselled him, and she went down to the city of Perth, and a male child was born to the house of Jepson, and when it was a month old she sent for Jepson, and for all of Jepson's relatives to come and see it, and be present at its baptismal ceremony, for she declared that the child should be christened in state.

And Jepson and all his house—even the father and the mother that begat him—came to the christening, and it came to pass that when they were all assembled the nurse stood with the sleeping child in her arms, and the face of the babe was covered with a piece of fine linen, and the mother stood on the left-hand side of it, and the man of God who was to do the christening stood on the right-hand side, whilst Jepson stood at the side of his wife, and smiled upon them all, for he was

proud with a rich man's vanity that the child was a man-child—and his.

Then the man of God said: "What name do you desire that I shall give to this little one?"

And a great stillness fell upon them all, as the mother stepped forward and lifted up her hand. And the stillness lasted whilst a fleet runner might cover a hundred paces.

Then she said: "The child's name shall be the name of his father, and his mother, therefore christen the child Yadoo Mahomet Kurda Jepson," and with a swift movement she drew back the cambric cloth from the face of the child, and lo! it was as black as the inside of a fasting camel. The nose had the Semitic curve, and the eyes the Oriental lustre, and the lips the Eastern sensuality of a child of the sun. Of its mother the babe showed no trace, but the father—its real father—was stamped on every lineament, and all who saw marvelled and could make nothing of it—all excepting Jepson. He saw and understood; then, she who was his wife stood forth and told them all, and in conclusion said: "The wealth that this man sold me for, he has made over to me, to defraud his creditors; but I have settled it all—every shilling—on

the child, and he is now beggared and ashamed."

. . . .

Then Jepson went forth by the banks of the River Swan, and got down upon all fours in the wet mud, and invented seventy-seven thousand names for a fool, and heaped the whole lot on his own head, and hoped he might die before morning.

XX

THE WIDOW BINGHAM

XX

THE WIDOW BINGHAM

The Widow Bingham ought to have been satisfied with what fate had done for her, but she was not, widows seldom are, perhaps that is why they mostly become wives again at the earliest opportunity.

When the late Tobias Bingham had been in the flesh, his wife used to assert that she was the most unhappy woman in Canada, and there were some slight grounds for her claim, for "Toby" Bingham, one time lumberman, but in later years mill-owner, and farm proprietor, was not the sort of person to make home a paradise for any female. He was rough and brutal both in appearance and in speech, and his good-looking wife, who was a great many years younger than her lord, used to hint in her prayers at camp meetings that if it should please the Lord to call her home first, she hoped she might be sent to a cooler region than that which she felt certain

was being reserved for her spouse. She was very fond of camp meetings in those days and always took a prominent part in the proceedings, but she seldom took the camp preacher to her home after service to regale the good man on corn cakes and home-made butter. Her spouse used to say:

"Look, Kitty, I don't mind you givin' my good victuals to a tramp, providin' he's out of the house before I've got within kickin' distance, but I won't have my bacon an' eggs an' coffee an' cream, wasted on a man who tells me he won't moisten my lips with a drop o' cold water in the next world. If your preacher fellows say they won't share their good things with me in the next world, they shan't have any o' mine in this."

He did not interfere with her religion in any other way, but he would not let it influence him in his daily life, and he went on to the end, a rough, tough, money-making fellow, sometimes when he had more whisky than was good for him, or when he had been bested in a business deal, he would make his home a little one-man pandemonium.

It was not considered in local circles to be just the right kind of etiquette for a camp preacher to drift in to see Mrs Bingham concerning her soul at such periods. Mrs

Bingham did not like such untimely visits—Mr Bingham did not like them, and no one ever heard a camp preacher, who had been through the process, express any great admiration for that kind of call. Camp preachers who had the misfortune to choose those times for a soul-searching visit usually came in by the front door and left by skimming over the back fence.

And yet when Bingham died his widow carried her grief-stricken face over the whole district, and sought sympathy from old and young.

"He's gone," she used to say; "my dear one has been taken from my side, and I shall never look upon another like him."

All the sane and sober people in Allotmentville hoped most sincerely that she never would, unless she found him in some other neighbourhood. For "Toby" Bingham had left few friends who would have wished him back.

The camp preacher who performed the burial service was a stranger in the district, and only knew Bingham from his widow's description of him, and according to that account the deceased was a sweet and dainty lily whom no man might gild. Had the preacher been one of the elect, who had

called on the Binghams by the front door, and left by the back fence, he might have preached a different sermon over "Toby" Bingham's remains.

"He died as he had lived," concluded the preacher, "at the post of duty, doing with all his might what his right hand found for him to do," which was the truest part of the sermon, for "Toby" had been cut in half by one of his own circular saws, through tripping when hunting a negro sawyer round the bench with an empty rum bottle.

In the course of time, the fine-looking widow managed to make herself believe that the husband she had lost had been a heaven-born human poem, and she built around his memory a noble pile of virtues, whioh became accepted facts by constant repetition, except to those who had worked for the deceased, or with him. But if time hallowed the memory of the dead, it did not seem to make the widow unwilling to put a mere mortal in the place of the angel she had lost; still she did not seem quite able to make up her mind which of her many suitors to give her hand to.

At first it seemed as if Seth Manners, a smart-looking young American, was to bear off the prize, but he lost his grip before the

marriage was settled. Seth had first come to Allotmentville apparently in search of work, but he heard of the widow who owned the lumber mill, and five farms, and a number of allotments of land in the healthiest part of the town, and he made it his business to know that her one great weakness in life was camp meetings, and the somewhat hysterical joys to be found in their vicinity. So Seth the Astute disappeared for a season, and when he returned, he was no longer a toiler in search of earthly dross, but a preacher, a searcher after souls, and he stirred the very marrow of the simple part of the populace in the place.

One Sabbath he preached upon the deadly sin of gambling, and drawing a pack of cards from his coat-tail pocket he proceeded to show how cards were "stacked" by the ungodly. He placed a table in front of him and called a game of "poker" for four. He shuffled the cards with all apparent fairness, and asked a brother in a front seat to step out and cut the pack, then he dealt four "hands," three to his opponents and one for himself. It all looked so honest and simple that not a sinner present felt uncomfortable, but when the preacher held up each "hand" in turn and showed that he had dealt himself

a full hand and his adversaries only just enough trumps to coax them to gamble, then the sinners who were present began to feel a shade warm, but the sinful card-sharps were hot before he had finished, for not only did the preacher "stack" the cards, and later on plant aces all over his clothes, but he showed how and why it was done; then having interested his audience, he preached the most soul-shaking sermon ever heard in those parts against the sin of gambling. Later on he turned his eloquence against the drink traffic, and displayed such an intimate acquaintance with the ways of those sinful souls who dispensed cocktails, that it was evident that at some time or another he must have been in the trade himself.

The Widow Bingham was captivated by the burning eloquence of Seth the Preacher, and it was not long before his stylish gig and showy trotting mare might be seen in season and out of season in front of the farmhouse where the widow had gone to reside since the departure of "Toby" to a better clime. Some of the folk talked rather nastily concerning Seth and his showy trotting mare, but as they were for the most part single men who would have liked much to handle the

widow's money themselves, no one took much notice of them.

Now, though no one on the allotment knew it, Seth the Preacher was a "brand who had not been plucked from the burning," he was a professional sharper who had fixed his eyes upon the widow's bank account, and meant to have the handling of all the money that "Toby" Bingham had left. He had known "Toby" in the flesh, and knew that he had been one of the most unscrupulous knaves in all Canada.

When he first began to court the widow he used to sit in the shady, honeysuckle-covered porch of an evening, and listen to the widow dilating upon the many virtues of the defunct lumberman, and at such times Seth used to grin behind his hand and reply that he hoped "Toby's" spirit could be hovering near to hear how those he loved spoke of him after he had crossed Jordan. Then the ungodly sharp would grin again, because the thought of "Toby's" spirit being anywhere in the vicinity of water was too comical for any emotion besides silent mirth.

But after a while the recital of "Toby's" lovely character became monotonous, for the widow talked of little else, yet Seth stood it all for the sake of the dead man's dollars,

though, to relieve his feelings after an hour or two with Widow Bingham, he used to drive to the lonely little cemetery, which was on his way home, and enjoy himself. He would lean up against the low, iron railings which surrounded "Toby's" tomb, and tell the dead man just what he thought of him. He used to tell the widow that he went to pray for the soul of the deceased, and she said it was just lovely on his part.

He had got to that stage in his courtship, when, sitting half in shadow, half in light, he would draw his chair up to the widow's, and whilst fondling one hand with one of his, would slip the other arm around the plump, soft, yielding waist; he had to use some diplomacy in doing this, for the lady was coy, but Seth knew his business; he used to take her hand and press it, whilst he talked to her of Jerusalem, the Holy City. When his left arm stole round her waist, he shifted the conversation to the blue waters of Galilee, and spake of the soft, warm wind whispering through the cedar trees that lined the banks. Then he would nestle closer and closer, until his cheek rested against hers, and he would whisper of the silver stars that twinkle like the eye of sentinels in the blue black skies, that looked down upon the doves cooing and

mating in the olive groves on the Mount of Cedars. Then as her head slid to his shoulder, and her round palpitating body yielded more and more to the pressure of his arm, he would sing in his rich mellow baritone:

> "Joybells are ringing, angels are singing,
> When the souls of the saved are united."

Then the nigger serving wench, who generally used to manage to hear and see a lot of this courtship, used to swear that there would be a silence of some moments, when the widow's voice, sounding as if it were being smothered by a moustache, would creep through the gloom.

. . . "Don't, oh, oh!" . . . "you really mustn't" . . . "Oh, oh, *Mr* Manners!" . . . "Call me Seth, dear." . . . More silence, broken by faint "oh, oh's," in a female voice —"Well, Seth, then," . . . "Darlin'! Oh, you have rumpled my hair so; take your arm away." . . . "What, when'll I marry you? I dunno." . . . More silence, and more "oh, oh's;" "Don't talk of marryin', or givin' in marriage, *yet* Seth, dear, Toby's hardly cold yet——" Growls from Seth. "Don't think Toby *ever* will be cold; 'taint chilly where *he's* gone."

Another week or two would most assuredly

have seen the widow transplanted to the bosom of her adorer, Mr Manners, had it not been for an unrehearsed episode, which consisted principally of a giddily dressed young woman with a four months' old baby in her arms, who claimed to be the lawful Mrs Manners.

When Seth the Preacher saw the young woman and the baby with the widow, he just pulled his trotting mare up sharp, and said some things in the quaint phraseology of the way-back American mining camps and gambling saloons. The language reminded the widow of the deceased "Toby" in one of his explosive humours.

But the scamp soon regained his temper; driving up to the little group, he addressed himself to the young mother: "Well, Polly," he said with a chuckle, "you've just spoilt the best hand I ever held, spoilt it just as I was goin' to play too; but it's the luck of the game. Jump up, little woman, and let's get out o' this. Allotmentville will be unhealthy for camp preachers for awhile. Here, give me the baby; now climb. Good-bye, widder, if you ever want to sell them two chairs out in the honeysuckle porch, let me know. I'd like them to remind me of"—he laughed—"of Toby."

As he drove away with Polly and the baby,

she heard him singing in that mellow voice she had almost learned to love:

> "Joybells are ringing, angels are singing
> When the souls of the saved are united."

It was quite a time before the Widow Bingham allowed any of her other suitors to get as far as the honeysuckle porch with her; and she never saw the two chairs close together without feeling hot all over, because she felt instinctively that that wretch of a gambler would be sure to pave the way to peace with "Polly," by telling her of his courtship. For the same reason she could not bear to hear any preacher make even a passing reference to Jerusalem, or the waters of Galilee or the cedars and olives of the Holy Land. Her love episode had nearly shattered her faith in religion, and religious topics seemed to her to have lost their charm. As for the honeysuckle, she could never more bear the smell of it, and under the pretext that honeysuckle harboured snakes, she had that around the porch rooted up, and the spot where it had flourished knew it no more.

Abner Jefferson was the next man to make substantial progress with the widow. Abner was the blacksmith and wheelwright of Allotmentville, a powerfully built, plain-spoken

man; who never sang, and who had no great store of knowledge concerning the Holy Land; but his business was growing steadily, thanks to his sober habits, and love of hard honest work.

When the widow first began to tell Abner about the mass of virtues Toby deceased had possessed, the blacksmith had squared his shoulders, and looking her full in the face had said: "I knew Toby Bingham, man and boy, for thirty year, widder, knew him well, and there was more real downright wickedness in him to the square inch than you'll find in h—— to the square mile. Put what you like on his tombstone, my dear, but don't ask folks hereabouts to believe it."

He proposed to her one Sunday afternoon as they were looking at a couple of cows she had bought. He told her she looked "homey" and nice, leaning with her arm against the red cow's sleek flank. Then he proposed.

She said: "No."

"All right," he answered philosophically; "we won't say any more about it at present; but every time you see them cows, you jest think o' me."

It was different to the wooing of Seth Manners, and the widow sighed, for, woman-like, she had liked the honeysuckle episode.

A month later Abner proposed again, but

she answered that she had buried her heart with her husband. Abner, who had just lunched with her, remarked placidly that as she hadn't buried her appetite at the same time, the heart burying was no real bar to matrimony. Her poetic soul revolted against this sort of wooing, and she bade him think of her no more, as she intended to carry her poor bruised heart to the grave.

But that winter the fates were good to Abner. Snow had fallen as no man had ever known it to fall before, and when it was not snowing it was freezing. The cattle could scarcely be kept alive in the sheds, every living thing in the woods seemed to die off, except the wolves; and they were so hard pressed that on several occasions they came from the forests and carried off stray dogs from small towns like Allotmentville.

The "Christian Brothers'" Church was not so well patronised as usual; folks who lived at a distance preferred to stay at home and pray to going along the snow track through the forest, and risk being converted into lunch by the prowlers of the forest. Perhaps it was the knowledge that she had the newest and the handsomest sleigh, and the best-matched pair of horses in the district, that made the Widow Bingham determined to risk the journey,

possibly the fact that she had not seen the blacksmith for nearly three weeks may have had something to do with her determination, or it is quite possible that it was nothing more than the contrariness inherent in woman. Whatever prompted her to go is a mystery, but she went, driving her handsome horses herself, and displaying no mean skill in the process. She did not enjoy herself as much as she expected she would, because the blacksmith, who had changed the manner of his wooing, did not come near her any more than he was compelled to do. So just as the early night was setting in, she ordered her horses to be hitched to the sleigh, and expressed her intention to drive home.

"It's only two hours by the new cut through the woods," said she; "and I'm not a bit nervous."

Most of her friends tried hard to dissuade her from the risky ride, but a wilful woman will not part easily from her own way.

Leopold von Gantstadt, one of her admirers, suggested in a very limp and half-hearted way that he should accompany her and see her in safety, but there was no heart in his voice, and she curtly refused, much to the young German's delight, for he had no desire to make a late supper for some half-frozen wolf,

not even if the handsome widow was to be on the *menu* card with him. He had often told her, with tears in his blue eyes, that he would lay down his life for love of her—but that was in the summer, when no wolves were around looking for stray morsels.

Somehow the widow felt foolishly angry. She had an idea that if that rascally gambler—Seth Manners—had been present, she would not have been allowed to drive home alone. By the time she had got her furs and her gloves on, her courage had well-nigh failed her, for she knew the danger was real enough; but she knew also that the maids would titter if she flinched at the final moment, and say she had only proposed the adventure in the hope of cajoling the men to offer their services as escort. As for Abner, the smith, she vowed from the core of her heart never to allow *him* to come near her home again. In this spirit she went to the door where her sleigh was standing, and with trembling limbs climbed up and held out her hands for the reins, but the man who was sitting there holding the horses pushed her hand back.

"Don't be a fool!" he said gruffly. "Sit tight." And before she could offer any remonstrance the whip fell, and the horses, aching with cold, darted off.

She did not say a word, but somehow she suddenly felt delightfully warm all over, though a biting wind that carried snow with it was blowing full in her teeth. The man drove in silence, and she noticed with a little thrill of fear that he carried a rifle across his knees. For fully an hour her stubbornness kept her silent, then the strain proved too great. "Can't you use your tongue, Abner?"

"I could if I wanted to; but I prefer to use my ears."

"What for, Abner?"

"Wolves," he answered laconically.

She shivered in real earnest then, and got closer to him; for the track through the pines was very narrow, and the black forest lay grim and gaunt on either side. For half an hour longer they sped along, the horses stepping out merrily. All at once she noticed Abner half turn his head and listen, then he swung round, took a tighter grip of the reins, and lashed out with his whip, the horses bounded forward at furious speed, and the sleigh rushed onward. She knew what it all meant, the horses knew it too; they carried their heads far outstretched in front of their bodies, their muzzles outwards and downwards, their ears flattened back, no need to flog them, they did their best without the whip.

The widow had got her nerve back as the danger increased; she turned where she sat, and watched, kneeling on the seat. Suddenly she clutched his arm, three creatures that looked like shadows had leaped from the wood on to the trail not forty yards behind them.

"See anything?" he asked.

"Yes, three."

"Close up?"

"Yes."

"Take the reins and drive, we are within a mile of home. Don't let the horses swerve off the trail, if you do, they'll knock the sledge to matches against the trees, and we'll be pie for the pack."

"I'm a good shot, Abner, give me the rifle."

"Do as you're told, Mary, I'm boss wherever I am."

It was the first time he had ever called her "Mary."

She smiled in spite of her fear, smiled and obeyed; and a minute later Abner's rifle was talking eloquently. The serving-men at the farm heard it too, and knew its meaning. Picking up lanterns, or blazing logs, or anything that would give a light, they rushed out into the roadway to welcome the travellers.

"Get the horses out quick!" shouted the smith, as he sprang to the track, his rifle ready in his hands. Standing thus, he growled his orders as if he was master already.

"Throw the house door open, drag the horses in that way, don't try for the stable, it's a big pack and a hungry one."

The frightened horses were easily dragged, and driven into the farmhouse, the servants quickly followed, as a black mass came from the woods towards the house. The widow, standing on the doorstep, called to the man on the track, who was fondling his rifle: "Come in, Abner, come quick, dear."

He chuckled as he sprang to her side. The door closed, and turning, he kissed her in front of them all, and then went and sat himself down at the head of the table.

XXI

LITTLE WOOD PIGEON

(A ROMANCE OF JAPAN)

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LITTLE WOOD PIGEON

(A ROMANCE OF JAPAN)

GIROW KIKUCHI was a Japanese diplomat, who had at one time been a person of considerable influence, but he had fallen upon evil days. He had been stripped of his high office, and most of his wealth had been taken from him in fines. His enemy, Usiu Heroshi, who hated him, and plotted for his downfall, displayed no pity for his rival when his heel was on his throat.

"Girow Kikuchi is too fat in this world's goods," Heroshi used to say to the Governor; "we must press more fines upon him, so that he may become humble, and cultivate a meek and proper spirit"—and the Governor being a man born without bowels of compassion, and having a wide palm, and a pocket that was always crying out to be filled, readily fell into the scheme of the spoiler; and together

they stripped Kikuchi nearly bare, so that in his old age he lived in a little house built of paper, with his two daughters and a Chinese handmaiden.

The eldest of his daughters was called "O Yama Bato," which means Little Wood Pigeon; the second, "O Taki San," was named the Sweet Bamboo.

The Chinese handmaiden was christened "Gi Wing," which in the flowing language of the Old East stands for Woven Cloud.

Little Wood Pigeon was small of stature, and very sweet—her voice was a perpetual caress.

Have you sat amidst the litter of some sunny farmyard and listened to the pigeons making love—listened to the deep-throated, sensuous notes of the blue and bronze beauties courting under the stable eaves, or on the ledge of the gable end of the barn? If you have, you will have noted how every rolling note speaks for pleasure. You must have noticed how each full, rich, love coo, possesses all the elements of triumph, and all the sweet pain of surrender.

When the Japanese damsel spoke to any one, either man or lad, she had just such tones in her voice, but more especially when she spoke to a man in the gloaming. When

she laughed, she laughed from the throat; right down in the bottom of her throat, and the notes came cooing upwards, just kissing her lips as they passed through, as if paying tribute for the right to be free. She was a tiny thing; so small that at first glance you might easily have mistaken her for a child; but when once you had looked into her eyes, and on the dull, rich redness of her arched lips, if you were a man you would know that she was a woman, and a woman armed at all points. She had hands and feet small enough for a doll, and a mouth just big enough for a prayer, or a sigh to creep through. She hadn't a mouth big enough to swear with, and yet; well, wait a little while, a tiny cloud often heralds a tempest, and there were many things beside the grace of God inside the delicate skin of Little Wood Pigeon, just as there is in most women—as they say in Japan.

> "The best have a touch of the devil,
> And the worst have a taste of the saint.
> Mother Nature is Queen of all artists.
> Only God can see under the paint."

The Little Wood Pigeon's sister, Sweet Bamboo, was a tall, slender girl much given to obedience and the cares of the household, to the raising of chickens and ducklings, and the

stemming of rice, a great maker of preserves and jellies, a manageress and economist in the drying and pickling of fish, and yet an adept in the matter of the selection of silks. She loved Little Wood Pigeon very dearly, though she was constantly at war with youths who came around in the starlight imitating the whistling of birds, and the night-calls of animals that prowl by starlight.

Sweet Bamboo was not averse to the company of young men; gladly would she have put her hand into that of any goodly youth who would have settled the matter first with her father; but none of her own caste came awooing openly, because of her father's disgrace, though there were plenty who would have pressed her hand in secret, if she would have allowed them to do so. But Sweet Bamboo was too discreet. She had some poetry in her blood, but not enough to make her forget that secret wooing often breeds open sorrow.

It was otherwise with Little Wood Pigeon. She would coo and woo with all who came in her way, but the laugh mostly lay with her in the end — her lovers went home as empty as they came—while she would eat her bowl of rice thrice filled, and then go and sleep the sleep that knows no dreams;

her little cheek pillowed upon her soft, pink palm, just as she had done when she was a baby under her mother's eyes.

To Sweet Bamboo she was a perpetual source of wonder. At first, worry had been added to the wonder, but that was before Sweet Bamboo had learned that her sister was a woman, born with the power of playing with the hearts of men as jugglers play with balls of fire.

The Little Wood Pigeon remembered the time when her father had been rich and powerful, and his home full of luxury and servants, and it was in her heart to bring about the return of those good times, but she knew that there was but little chance of her dreams being realised, whilst the great enemy of his house, Usui Heroshi, remained in favour in high places.

He was an evil man who had done much harm to many people in his day and generation, and was hated by many; but he was feared also, and fear is a good shield always.

But Little Wood Pigeon did not fear him. She used to say to Sweet Bamboo that a man was like a reed, out of which a clever woman could make her own music, if she only had faith in herself—and Little Wood Pigeon had faith of that sort, and to spare,

but Sweet Bamboo sometimes doubted, for she hated plotting and scheming, not knowing where it might end.

But there was one member of the household who believed in Little Wood Pigeon, believed in her not only as a woman, but in her power to intrigue successfully, even against men in high places; and that was Woven Cloud, the Chinese handmaiden.

So great was the Japanese damsel's influence over this woman, that she would have done almost anything that her young mistress desired her to do without the faintest hesitation. She was subtle, secret, and conscienceless as any graven god in all China. To her, expediency, and the commands of her mistress were the beginning and the end of the law; nothing else was of any moment. Those two understood each other, and waited for the fulness of time for the figs to ripen.

Every one else but Woven Cloud saw in her master's daughter a pretty little plaything, a living doll, that men might make sport of, and go unscathed—but the Chinese woman knew better. When she heard the Little Wood Pigeon cooing in the ears of some of her admirers, the eyelids would narrow down over her quaint oval eyes, until nothing could be seen of them but two slits of dusky velvet

that sparkled like fire. That was Woven Cloud's method of making merry.

She had never laughed outright in all her life; people thought her rather dull, and very stupid, but her young mistress knew that she was a mine of deep and lasting intelligence, all the more valuable because no one suspected the wealth that lay hidden away under the surface.

Sometimes, at very rare intervals, a Chinaman, who was said to be the woman's brother, would come to see her. He nearly always came at night, and went again before the dawn. When he first began to visit her Woven Cloud had told the two sisters that the man was her brother, who was a travelling merchant in a small way.

Sweet Bamboo had received the information concerning both the relationship and the man's occupation all in good faith, and had made the visitor welcome; but Little Wood Pigeon had curved down the corners of her pink lips, and had let the cooing little noise creep up from her throat. She knew, and Woven Cloud knew that she knew, and the knowledge was a bond between them.

Only once in all her little life did Little Wood Pigeon make a bad slip. A youth came a-wooing—not the ordinary lad full of sighs

and tears and love songs—but a stormy lad, who believed in the strong hand, and—well, for a season Little Wood Pigeon found her master. It was a thing she kept to herself.

One day she came home to Sweet Bamboo with a wonderful tale. She had been down, she said, in the rice fields, wandering in the early dawn, and as she wandered she heard a sweet little cry, such a strange little cry, and she had stopped and listened, and all the world seemed still. Wondering more and more, she had pushed through the growing rice, something fluttering at her heart. Then she paused, and looked about her until the cute little cry had come again, a cry that was small enough to reach no ears but her own, and yet strong enough to drown all the world's noises.

She would have heard it above the tramp of armies, above the howling of wrecking storms, above the rending of a world, for it was infancy calling to motherhood: but she did not tell that to Sweet Bamboo. All that she told her was that she had found a tiny, helpless baby boy lying in a patch of growing rice, and because of its helplessness she had brought it home, and Sweet Bamboo had taken the little thing to her heart and loved it, believing every word. But Woven Cloud, the handmaiden, had drawn her eyelids close

together until nothing was to be seen but a line between the lids like a flash of steel—and another link was forged between mistress and maid.

One morning when all the world seemed young, when the birds were singing at the very flush of dawn, and the flowers around the little paper house were lifting up their heavy heads to the faint breeze that just stirred their petals, and robbed them of their wealth of perfume, Woven Cloud beckoned Little Wood Pigeon to follow her into the fields, and the two women went, the little brown toy-like creature leading the yellow woman, both silent, both secret, both full of resource.

At the corner of the field that led from the paper house, just where the early sunlight fell and warmed the world, and the bees and the butterflies kissed the flowers, Sweet Bamboo sat bathing a tiny child in a running stream of limpid water, whilst the old man, her father, lying on the grass smoking placidly, smiled upon both the girl and the babe, thinking the world well lost in the senility of his peace.

Wood Pigeon and Woven Cloud did not pause, they did not laugh, they only looked at each other, and for a moment the sun stood

still, time and eternity centring for one brief second on the smiling face of the baby. Then they moved onwards until they were out of reach of all eavesdroppers.

"It has come." It was the handmaiden who spoke.

"It is welcome, tell me concerning it—I have waited long," cooed Little Wood Pigeon.

"Your enemy is in your hand, you have only to close your fingers."

"Speak, then, for I am listening."

"My brother"—Woven Cloud played with the word *brother*, as a child plays with a sweet morsel on the tongue, and Little Wood Pigeon nodded as one who understands fully—"my brother has told me all, and I am to tell you; it is his wish—if it were not, it would be all the same, I should tell you."

Again the little brown head nodded vigorously, and the cooing laugh crept up from the rich, round throat.

Woven Cloud spoke on. "The enemy of your house is at the head of a plot to stir up a rebellion; my brother is one of his most trusted agents. He is swollen with power and thinks to make himself greater than he is. He is sending letters far and near, letters that speak for rebellion and bloodshed. He is one who puts fire into a field of flax, and

will not wait for the wind, but fans it with his own hands."

"And the letters—where are they?"

Woven Cloud drew a sheaf of letters from the bosom of her gown and put them into the tiny outstretched hands of her mistress. Then she said: "There are the man's letters, and the man's head all in one." He brought ruin to your family, the strings of his life are now between your finger and thumb.

. . . .

With the sheaf of letters hidden in her sleeve, Little Wood Pigeon called upon the chief representative of the Mikado, as he sat in the town of Yalu, and he, being a wise man, read them first, and spoke afterwards —for he knew a woman when he saw one, and when he had read the evidence, he made careful but very secret enquiries, and at the end thereof he sent for Little Wood Pigeon, and said: "Your father is to be restored to his old post, for an enemy lied away his fair fame; but the head of his enemy is even now on the end of a pole where four roads meet, as a warning to others like him.

"Is there anything that can be done for you? I am told that there is a child that was found in the rice fields at the dawn of

a summer's day. Can anything be done for the little thing that was sent by the gods?"

"Let it remain with my sister; Sweet Bamboo would die if it were taken from her, for she loves it as if it were her own," said Little Wood Pigeon, looking steadily into the unfathomable eyes of the great man, with eyes as inscrutable as his own. "It was sent by the gods in the days of our poverty and disgrace; we will cling to it now in the dawn of our prosperity and wealth, lest the gods grow angry with us; but," she added, and her eyes flashed a look into his, which answered as steel answers steel, "if ever I meet the father who deserted it in its evil hour, he will wish that he, and not the child, had never been born."

And the great man who understood women, stroked his chin as she passed out of his sight—stroked his chin and put up a prayer to his God, that no son of his might prove to be the father of the foundling of the rice fields.

XXII

THE FIDDLE OF DEATH

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THE FIDDLE OF DEATH

We had picketed our camels close to the camp fires, instead of allowing them to roam about in search of food among the salt bush, because the blacks were bad in the district in which we had gone to prospect for gold. Though they were too cowardly to attack a well-armed party of adventurers, all of whom were inured to danger and sudden surprises, yet, as we well knew, they were quite capable of sneaking upon straying camels in the starlight. And a spear thrust is an easy matter when you have to deal with a non-fighting creature like a camel. As the success of our operations was largely bound up in our camel teams we were very careful.

I had charge of the party, and the men were all picked for their knowledge of bush craft, and their indomitable pluck. Nearly all of them were grey-beards, who had sampled hardships in every form; men who could live

on the smell of an oil rag, and camp, if need be, upon granite; hard, roving, silent men who looked upon life as a gamble, and cared not how the game went, so long as they had what they termed "a run for their money."

The camp fires were blazing merrily, our supper was below our belts, our arms lay ready for a sudden call. The camels, savage because they could not roam at will in the starlight, were chewing the cud, and hiccoughing and snarling as only camels can.

We were taking things easy. It had been a hard day, for we had pushed inland far and fast to reach this spot, because at this camp we had to meet two of our party who had gone ahead to find an ancient bush recluse, who was said to have the secret of great gold deposits in his possession. He was a half-wild man, who had been sent out to Australia as a convict for the term of his natural life, and had consorted with no white man since the day the Government of West Australia had granted him ticket-of-leave.

We were not anxious about our two comrades, for Billy Frost and Jim Connelly were men who could go anywhere and do pretty nearly anything that human beings dare attempt. So I gave the order, a rare one at all times with prospectors, to pass

around a tot of rum to each man, and we sat with the tin pannikins in our hands, sipping and smoking in the glow of the bivouac fires.

All at once a kangaroo hound that had been crouching at my feet rose, and with ears pricked up, began to sniff the night air. A moment later the brute barked, and I thought he had scented some black fellow creeping in the bushes near the camp, but a moment afterwards the hound gave a short joyous yelp, and sprang away into the night, and we knew who was coming—it was Jim Connelly's dog.

One of the men, with that good nature which camp life breeds, at once rose from his comfortable resting-place and slung a "billy" over the fire to make tea, another laid out a frugal supper, and by the time this was done the men we were waiting for arrived. Frost and Connelly were mounted upon two of our fastest riding camels. The stranger with them rode a mule. He was a large, loose-jointed man with a long, white beard that nearly touched his belt. On his back he carried his "swag" as most nomads of his kind and class do, for they spend their lives wandering from one spot to another, and have no settled abode.

Whilst this personage was having his supper Jim Connelly whispered to me that in his belief the nomad was as "cranky as a cockroach, but," he added, "he knows two things, and knows 'em well."

"What may those two things be, Jim?" I demanded.

"Well," answered Jim, "he knows this part of the bush better than he knows his own whiskers; knows every rock and shrub, every grass patch and water hole. If there is metal anywhere here, that old ticket-of-leave man knows where it is to be found, and he knows how to play the fiddle as no other man that ever lived can play it. We've camped with him for four nights, and he has played each night in a way that has given me the jumps. Billy Frost and I bargained to go and find him, and to bring him here, but I wouldn't camp alone with him for a month if you gave me a Sunday suit made of diamonds."

"Why not?"

"You wait until you've heard him play, and you won't ask 'why not.' He talks to his infernal fiddle as if it were a living thing—a thing he hated, too; something he wanted to torment and torture."

I smiled, thinking that the grey ghostliness,

the awful uncanny silence and loneliness of the bush we had been travelling in so long had at last got on to the steel-edged nerves of the stoutest-hearted bushmen I had ever met.

"Better have a small drop out of the stone jar, Jim, old man," I said. "You're a bit knocked up and undone."

He took the jar and the pannikin, and as he lifted the brown medicine to his lips, he remarked: "Yes, I am a bit undone, and you'll feel that way too when you've heard that fiddle and heard Old Whiskers talking to it, cursing and blaspheming, with blood in his eyes and foam upon his lips. You're awfully fond of stories, and I know you love nothing better than to get these old convicts to tell you their life history, as they sit o' nights round your camp fire. Well, if you can make this cranky beggar tell the story of that fiddle, I'll bet you will hear something that will make your hair walk. . . ."

After supper that bush derelict talked to us of gold that lay hidden in a dry salt lake. He talked like a man who knew his subject by heart, and for a couple of hours we hung upon his words. We knew who he was—knew that he was a "lifer," a man who had been found guilty of some horror or another in

England, but there were many such in the far-back country, and we were too used to that sort of thing to mind much.

At last we shook out our blankets and prepared to turn in, but "Old Whiskers," as Jim irreverently called the derelict, drew from his swag a fiddle of uncouth make and shape, evidently manufactured either by himself or by some brother wanderer.

The nomad became a transformed being as soon as he had his crude fiddle in his hands. He sat and gazed at it for a while in silence, then his whole body became convulsed with rage. His hair and his beard fairly bristled. He picked up the bow and played a few preliminary notes, then he crouched forward and drew the bow slowly backwards and forwards across the strings. And out upon the night air came sounds that set my teeth on edge. I have heard a lot of music in my time, but never anything like that. It was like the screaming and wailing of a human being in torment. Faster and faster moved the bow, and the wailing changed to shrieking.

One by one the men sat up in their blankets. Some of them put their fingers in their ears, some threw pannikins or meat-tins at the player, but he heeded no one. He

talked as he played, cursing, snarling, laughing madly; and all the time the violin emitted those unearthly sounds.

My Afghan servant came and crouched close to me. "That old man got a devil," he said.

If he had ventured the opinion that the violinist had got ten or a dozen devils I should not have felt like disagreeing with him.

Billy Frost tossed away his blankets and saddle, and sprang up. "Look here," he cried, "I'll stand that old lunatic asylum in trousers no longer. If you don't stop him I will. I'll burn that blessed fiddle no matter what happens."

He strode over to the nomad, but the man rose and dashed off into the night, and we could hear him playing hour after hour. It was awful, even the dogs seemed to know that there was something unholy, uncanny, in those sounds. Every now and again we heard shrieks of maniacal laughter mingling with the music, followed by wild volleys of curses that were intended for some human being.

At last silence came, and we went out to seek for this half-demented man, and found him lying exhausted amidst some coarse tussock grass. His face was turned up to

the skies, his beard was covered with foam, and in his right hand he clutched his fiddle. We carried him to the camp, and laid him by the fire; and after a while he came to himself again. Then I pushed the rude fiddle in front of him, and said: "Tell me the history of that thing."

He wavered a moment, but Jim Connelly thrust a pannikin of rum in his old hands, and he began to talk whilst the gold-hunters gathered closer round him. He was slow of speech at first, but soon his words came like a flood.

"I am a ticket-of-leave-man. I was sent out of England to Western Australia for hurting a man. I had no spite against the man I nearly killed. I assaulted him in order that I might be sent to the penal settlements. I wanted to find a man who was 'doing time,' and the only way to lay my hands upon him was to get a life sentence."

He stopped talking, picked up the fiddle, and, yelling with wild laughter, began to play until Jim Connelly tore the bow away from him. Then he resumed his tale.

"I found him! I found him!" he said. "And he is here." He slapped the fiddle with his open palm. "I've got his soul in here, and I torture and torment him every night.

I shall do so as long as I live. He was a devil, and I am making him pay for his sins."

"Why?" I asked, as soothingly as I could speak.

"Because he ruined Elsie Moir; bonnie, winsome Elsie Moir, the pride of the Essex coast. I was a sailor, and she was the daughter of a man who owned a dozen fishing smacks. He stole her love from me, and ruined her, body and soul."

He ran his fingers along the fiddle strings, and made them squeal. We stopped him; then he spat on the fiddle and talked again.

"I was away with my ship when he met her." (He pointed to the fiddle every time he said he.) "I was chief officer, and Elsie and I were soon to have married. He won her love somehow. They called him a gentleman, a handsome fellow, who lured her away to London after getting her to go through a mock marriage. The 'parson' who performed that ceremony was no clergyman, only one of his cursed companions. She found it out soon, but she had given him her heart—a good woman's gift to a bad man. Then there came a day when the police were hunting him for coining and uttering bad money. He had

used her to pass the spurious coins, which she had done in all innocence, knowing nothing of forgery.

"He slunk out of it with devilish cleverness, and left her to bear the brunt of it all. And she stood up white-faced and beautiful in the dock and refused to say a word to clear herself for fear of convicting him, and he, the coward, stood there in the crowded court and never lifted a finger to save her. He heard her sentenced to transportation, and knew that she would be sent to herd with the vilest women the world owned. And he let her go to her doom, which was a thousand times worse than death to a girl like that—a girl who had never done an evil thing in all her life.

"They sent her out in a convict ship, sent her among devils who were steeped to the lips in every kind of vice and crime. And he, the hound, went free. When I came back from sea I heard of it all, and I threw up my berth to go in search of him; but he slipped through my fingers and I never saw him until he again stood in the dock at the Old Bailey charged with just such another crime. He was convicted, and he, too, was sent across the seas. But I was not satisfied; I wanted vengeance for the ruin of a woman's life, and I struck a

man down in mad rage in order to be near him. I was three years in the chain gang before I ever heard of my enemy, but I did hear of him at last. He had escaped from prison, and was known to be in hiding in the bush, and no policeman could find him. Then I beset myself to the task of getting out on ticket.

"No man worked as hard, or as well as I; no man behaved better, and in time I was recommended by the warders to the governor, and my ticket-of-leave was granted me. It was then that I set myself to find the woman I had loved, the woman who was to have been my wife, the woman he had dragged down into the pit. And I found her an inmate of the lunatic ward of a penal settlement."

He snatched the bow from Jim Connelly's hands and made the violin howl and screech until he drove us nearly frantic.

"Did you ever find the man who ruined Elsie Moir?" I demanded.

"Yes," he jibbered; "yes, I found him. It took me years to do it; but he is there—there—there!" His horny fingers pointed straight into the fiddle. "You think I'm mad; I'm not. He is there. I followed every clue. I tracked him patiently for years. The police

had given him up for lost or dead, but I searched on, and I found him in the bush. He had made money somehow, and had settled down as a respectable sheep-farmer, and no one suspected him. He had blinded the law, but he could not blind the man who had loved sweet Elsie Moir.

"I got him to myself at last, got him where none could come between us. He was a strong man, with long, sinewy arms, and one evening he was boasting of his strength, and showed me the sinews that ran along his wrists.

"'They are tough enough to make fiddle strings,' he cried, clenching his finger to make the sinews stand out higher and higher.

"'Tough enough to make fiddle strings,' his words put an idea into my brain, 'Tough enough to make fiddle strings.'

"In those arms he had held Elsie Moir in all her beauty; my Elsie, the girl who had known the torments of prison and the prison mad-house. Then I sprang upon him, and held him by the throat and shouted her name in his ears, 'Elsie Moir'—'Elsie Moir.' And so I held him till he died. There was no one to see, no one to help."

The nomad began to laugh. Then he snatched up the fiddle again. "Listen," he

cried. "Listen!" again that awful music came screeching forth. He was on his knees as he played, and as the bow crossed and recrossed the strings he peered down as if looking into the face of the man he had killed. And the fiddle shrieked "Elsie Moir—Elsie Moir."

Next morning he had gone and there were no volunteers to go and look for him. But we all looked at the sinews in our own arms and shuddered.

THE END

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